

WILD WEST

WEEKLY

A MAGAZINE CONTAINING STORIES, SKETCHES Etc OF WESTERN LIFE.

Issued Weekly—By Subscription \$2.50 per year. Application made for Second-Class Entry at N. Y. Post Office.

No. 55.

NEW YORK, NOVEMBER 6, 1903.

Price 5 Cents.

YOUNG WILD WEST—ON A CROOKED TRAIL; OR, LOST ON THE ALKALI DESERT.

By AN OLD SCOUT.

EDDY



Young Wild West and Jim Dart crept a little nearer. "You'll leave me here for ther vultures to feed on, will yer?" screamed the wounded man. "Then you'll die first. Griff Barton!" His left hand clutching a revolver was raised.

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YOUNG WILD WEST ON A CROOKED TRAIL,

OR,

Lost on the Alkali Desert.

BY AN OLD SCOUT

CHAPTER I

YOUNG WILD WEST MEETS A VIGILANCE COMMITTEE.

"Stop right where you are, you weary pilgrims!"

"Certainly. What is the trouble?"

"Hold up your hands, the three of you, or you'll never know there's such a thing as trouble ag'in!"

Three horsemen had been stopped as they rode through a desert and suddenly came to a little open space on the plains of western Arizona.

It was a rather warm day in the fall of the year, and perspiring horses of the band of men that had stopped showed that they had been riding hard.

The three who had been confronted by the formidable so suddenly were two boys and a man.

They were attired in neat fitting, not to say fancy suits buckskin, and their every appearance indicated that they're genuine Westerners.

He who had answered the call to stop was probably the most striking looking horseman of the lot.

He was scarcely more than twenty, handsome and of medium build, and the perfect type of a boy born and reared in the Wild West.

Just the vestige of a smile crept over the lower part of countenance as he asked what the trouble was, and dark eyes looked the spokesman of the band squarely in the face, while he tossed the wealth of chestnut hair hanging over his shoulders aside in an indifferent way.

His two companions seemed to be as much amused as, and when they were told to hold up their hands, in-

stead of obeying, they each jerked out a pair of revolver and leveled them at the men who had challenged them.

That this action was entirely unsuspected was evident, for the men, though they had partly drawn their shooters, had not pointed them at the three.

"I don't happen to be compelled to hold up no bandits just now," said the daring boy with the flowing chestnut hair. "It is you fellows who must do that. Up with them now, or hot lead will begin to sizzle through the air!"

There were ten of them, and not one of them refused to obey the command.

Up went their hands just as quickly as though half a hundred desperate men confronted them, instead of two boys and a man.

But it was the ring in the boy's voice that made them obey as much as anything else.

There was something in it that told them that he meant just what he said, and that he was not to be trifled with.

"It might be that we've made a mistake, strangers," said the spokesman, as he looked at the handsome face of the boy, who was plainly the leader of the trio.

"I guess you have," was the calm rejoinder. "Had you the idea that you were going to rob us?"

"Oh, no!"

"What, then?"

"We thought you might belong to Griff Barton's gang, an' we wanted to make sure afore you could go any further in this direction."

"Oh! Well, we do not belong to Griff Barton's gang; we do not belong to any gang. We are simply three fellows out in this part of the country on a little business."

"Might I ask who you are?"

"I am Young Wild West, and my partners here are Cheyenne Charlie and Jim Dart. Our home is at Weston, in the Black Hills, but we are seldom there, as we travel around in different parts of the West. Is that answer sufficient, sir?"

"Yes, I reckon it is."

"May I have the pleasure of learning your name, then?"

"I'm Oll Gilpin, ther captain of this party, which are a vigilance committee that was organized at ther little town-of Gray Plume last night. We are out after Griff Barton and his gang, which raided ther town yesterday an' carried off about five thousand dollars in gold, besides killin' two men, three wimmen and a child. We are on their trail, and when we heard you come through the sage brush we made up our minds not to let you go till you give an account of yerselves. But you was too quick, an' you got the drop on us."

"Which shows that you are not up to snuff," observed Young Wild West, smiling more than ever. "When you are expecting to meet anybody you ought to be ready for them."

"We was ready, but—"

"But what?"

"Well, you're about the slickest fellers I ever seen, that's all I kin say."

Before anything further could be said a volly of rifle shots rang out close at hand, and three of the men threw up their hands and fell from the saddle.

"To cover, boys!" cried Oll Gilpin, dropping his hands and seizing his bridle rein. "That's Griff Barton's gang now."

Young Wild West, who was commonly known as the Prince of the Saddle and Champion Deadshot of the West, flashed his eagle eyes in the direction the shots came from and caught sight of a man peering from behind a tree.

His rifle flew to his shoulder as quick as a flash.

Crack!

As the report rang out the man stood upright in full view for one brief instant, and then pitched forward on his face.

"There goes one of them!" he said, calmly. "He'll never fire another cowardly shot."

Then he followed his two companions back to the cover of the bushes just as another volly was fired.

But the vigilants had moved to cover so quickly that the only damage done to them was that one of their horses was shot.

There happened to be a ridge of sand right there, and they quickly dismounted and caused their horses to lie down behind it.

Young Wild West and his partners did likewise, showing that they meant to remain there and help the vigilants out.

Then the shots began flying thick and fast.

But it was a noticeable fact that Young Wild West and his two partners did not fire half as often as did the vigilants.

When they did fire, however, they always hit the mark.

They were not in the habit of wasting any shots.

At the end of ten minutes the shooting began to subside.

The attacking band had evidently got enough for the present.

The vigilants had lost four men, three having gone down at the first fire, and the other by receiving a single bullet.

"Gentlemen," said Young Wild West, "if that is the gang you are on the trail of, I must say they are a very bad lot. As we are opposed to all such men as they are, if you have no objections, we will follow them up with you and assist in putting the finishing touches to them."

"You will?" asked Oll Gilpin, eagerly. "Do you mean that, Young Wild West?"

"I certainly do. I never say anything I don't mean."

"On hearing this the vigilants, who had been pretty downhearted at losing three or four of their number, burst into a cheer."

They very readily saw what a valuable acquisition three would make to their party.

The coolness and daring they possessed was remarkable.

Pretty soon the shooting died out altogether.

The villainous gang could be seen riding off.

Young Wild West was just going to propose that they follow them when he heard a crashing in the undergrowth not far distant, and the next moment the form of a man running like a deer came in sight.

One glance showed our friends that it was a darky.

He was a typical southern darky, too, and he was about as frightened as a person could well be, and be able to keep upon his feet.

"Sabe me, marsars, sabe me!" he shouted, when he saw the band of men in the act of mounting their horses. "I done git away from dem bad men, an' I doesn't want 'em to kotch me ag'in!"

"Take it easy, you son of darkness!" called out Cheyenne Charlie, whose face wore a broad grin at the comic appearance the colored man made.

He wore a ragged linen duster, and his kinky wool was topped off with a battered plug hat that had once been a rich pearl color, but now looked like any color except that.

In one hand he carried a green bag that contained a banjo, and in the other was a long barreled horse pistol.

"Where in blazes did it drop from?" drawled one of the vigilants who went by the name of Gallop. "It's a minstrel show broke loose in the wilderness of Arizona."

"I reckon somethin' of ther kind has took place," spoke up Cheyenne Charlie, as he stroked his dark, silky beard.

"Wait until the darky gets his breath, and then you will find out what brings him here," said Wild, who

was smiling with the rest at the comical appearance he made.

The dusky fellow dropped in a heap to the ground the instant he got among the men and horses.

"I know what'll fix 'im," said one of the vigilants, and he produced a brown flask from his pocket.

A couple of swallows of the contents revived the darky wonderfully.

He soon sat up and looked around.

"Who are you, anyway?" remarked Jim Dart, who happened to be the nearest to him.

"Ise Marsar Higgins' nigger, Bud; I done run away from ther plantation, sar."

"Where is the plantation?"

"Away de odder side of El Paso, sar."

"And you have managed to get away out here?"

"Yes, sar. Ise been t'ree months comin', sar."

"And you've got your old banjo with you, I see," spoke up Young Wild West, nodding at the green bag which the darky had not relinquished his hold upon.

"Oh, yes, sar. I done stiek to dat t'rough thick an' thin, sar. It am de only comfort dat Marsar Higgins' nigger has got left, sar. De bad men didn't take him from me; dey say, 'let him keep de old banjo to make fun fur us when we is crossin' de desert.'"

"They said that, did they?"

"Yes, sar."

"The scoundrels must be going to cross the Alkali strip, then," said Wild, turning to Oll Gilpin.

"They must be, according to that," answered the leader of the vigilants.

"It isn't a very nice thing to do, is it?"

"No, it's mighty risky to attempt it," and the man shook his head doubtfully.

"Well, if they make the trail for us we can follow it. Since we know where they are heading for, there is no particular hurry for us to follow them. We will try and overtake them at the edge of the desert; then it will be quite easy to bring them to terms, one way or the other."

"We will leave it all to you, won't we, boys?"

"Yes!" chorused the vigilants with one accord.

"Very well. Now proceed to bury the dead."

The men at once set to work to do this, and when the grawsome task was finished they reported that they were ready for further orders.

"Well," said Young Wild West, looking at the watch he carried, "it is about noon, so I guess we had better have something to eat before we strike out."

"That's what I think," retorted Oll Gilpin.

"You've got grub with you, I suppose?"

"Yes, plenty of it."

"Well, we are not so very well fixed for coffee and all as we might be. We have been in the saddle for nearly a week, you know."

"Where are you headin' for, anyhow?"

"The California border line."

"On a little buisness, you said, didn't you?"

"Yes, a little private business."

"Oh! Don't think I'm inquisitive, please."

"Naw! He ain't inquisitive, young feller; he can't help askin' questions, that's all," spoke up the vigilant who was called Gallop.

"I see," and Young Wild West smiled.

He had come to the conclusion that he had met a band of honest men, and as he believed their story, he meant to help them out.

That was the kind of fellow Young Wild West was!

CHAPTER II.

GRIFF BARTON AND HIS OUTLAW BAND.

The gang that had fired upon the vigilants was really the one Oll Gilpin had told Young Wild West about.

Griff Barton was a tall, sinister looking man, with a heavy mustache, and one good look at his countenance would have convinced the ordinary observer that he was every inch a scoundrel.

It was true that he had led a raid in open daylight on the little town of Gray Plume.

He was a desperate man, and when he got a little rum in him he was liable to attempt anything in the line of villainy.

The men of the town were nearly all at work in the mines that had been the means of making the town spring up, when he made the raid; hence his success.

Cruel and heartless, the murdering of the woman and the child did not affect Griff Barton in the least.

The raid had been a great success, as he had secured the sum of five thousand dollars in cold cash.

But he knew it would not do for him to tarry long in those parts.

Having crossed the desert of white sand that extended for over a hundred miles toward the border of California two or three times with perfect safety, he concluded to do it again, and thus evade the band of men that would surely pursue him to punish him for his crime.

"We'll lead them over a crooked trail," he said to his men, who numbered eighteen, all told. "We'll make a zig-zag of it until we reach the alkali strip, an' then we'll head straight across. I knows ther way as well as any man livin', an' we'll let 'em juggle around in ther cactus fer awhile, an' then follow us over the triky white sand, if they dare!"

On the morning of the day on which our story opens they had come across a darky mounted on a mule. He was lost, and after they had had no end of fun with him, they told him they were going to take him along on their trip across the desert, so he could amuse them on the way.

The villains did not go to the trouble of disarming him when they found that his weapons consisted of a big horse pistol and a razor.

They made him play the banjo until he tired, and then set out on their journey again.

When they came in sight of the band of vigilants there were just nineteen in the party, and when they started to retreat there were only twelve.

This was a little more than Griff Barton had bargained for, and he was in anything but a pleasant frame of mind as he headed off to the left of the direction they were to take to reach the growth of cacti and the desert.

"They may git us, boys," he said, with a look of grim determination, "but it'll be a blamed crooked trail that they'll have to foller. They've got some deadshots among them, too, an' we've got to be on ther lookout fer 'em. By leadin' 'em on this crooked trail we'll have a chance to ambush 'em, maybe, afore we git to ther desert."

This kind of talk quite naturally cheered up the villains somewhat, and a little burst of applause came from them.

In the excitement of their taking leave of the quarters where they had been exchanging shots with the vigilants, the villains forgot all about the darky they had captured and it was not until they were half a mile from the spot that they thought of him.

"How about ther coon, Cap?" asked one of them.

"Did we leave him behind?"

"Yes, I guess we must have. Here comes the blamed old mule he was ridin', though."

"Well, let ther coon go to blazes! I reckon he brought bad luck to us, anyway. Here we've gone and lost seven good men."

"That's a fac't, Cap. One of them was a brother of mine, too, and it makes me feel bad."

"Well, you want to remember that when you git a chance to pay them vigilants back, see?"

"Yes, you kin'bet I'll remember it."

The band rode on for half an hour, every now and then pausing to learn whether they were being pursued or not.

Finally Griff Barton became convinced that they were not, and then he felt a little easier.

At length they came to a deep ravine which ran in a direction almost opposite to the way they must go to reach the desert.

"We'll ride through here," he said, "and then if they come along an' follow us, we might ketch them when they come out at the other end and cripple 'em somewhat."

The ravine proved to be easily twelve miles in length, and it ran snake-like through the break in the mountain ridge.

When they got to the other end they came upon a running stream, and, noticing that the bottom was covered with rocks, Griff Barton hit upon an idea.

He concluded not to wait and ambush his pursuers, but to take to the stream and throw them off the trail.

Accordingly they did this, riding single file up the stream until it became so deep that they were forced to leave it.

But they had covered more than a mile in this way, and when they finally stepped their horses out of the water on a flat shelf of rock, Griff Barton gave a nod of satisfaction and said:

"Now, we'll head back from where we started up the ravine. They won't think that we've gone that way. When we git back there we'll strike out zig-zag for the alkali lands. We'll strike 'em afore to-morrer morning, an' have lots of rest between times."

And so they pursued their way until sunset, making all sorts of turns, and at every chance that offered, covering their tracks as they went.

Though the leader of the villainous gang felt it hardly possible that they would be pursued there, he took extra precautions to prevent surprise.

He sent out three men on foot to keep a sharp watch, while those who attended to the cooking worked away to get a meal in readiness.

After supper was eaten they rested for two hours, and then Griff Barton ordered all hands into the saddle again.

In the same serpentine and irregular way they proceeded until finally along toward sunrise the growth of cacti was reached.

Then the leader of the band called a halt again.

The cacti was prickly and dangerous to travel through, as the wounds which might be received from the sharp thorns in some cases might prove poisonous.

The men were pretty tired out, and they promptly threw their blankets on the ground and turned in.

But, as usual, a sharp watch was kept.

It was probably three hours after sunrise when Griff Barton aroused the sleeping men and told them to get breakfast and prepare for the journey across the sandy waste.

Though it was in the fall of the year, the sun shone upon the desert with intense heat.

When he was aroused from his slumber, the man who had lost a brother in the fight the day before, got in a stubborn mood.

He had never been across a desert of any kind, and when he looked at the sandy waste ahead of them he shook his head.

"I reckon I won't tackle that," he said.

"What's that, Biffer?" spoke up Griff Barton, who had overheard the remark.

"I said as how I guessed I wouldn't tackle that sand," answered the man, doggedly.

"You said that, did yer?" and the leader stepped up and flashed an angry look at the man.

"Yes, that's what I said, Griff Barton."

"Well, then, I say that you're going to tackle the sand along with the rest of us!"

Biffer made no reply.

"What do you say now?" resumed Barton, placing his hand upon the butt of a revolver.

"Ther same thing!" cried Biffer, springing to his feet with a shooter in his hand.

Instantly all was excitement in the camp. But no one offered to interfere.

The two belligerents stood facing each other, but neither had raised his revolver to a level.

It looked as though one of them was going to die.

They stood glaring at each other for probably the space of ten seconds.

Then the hard expression on the face of Biffer relaxed.

"All right, Cap," he said. "Let it drop, won't yer? I'm willin' to go where you lead."

"Good enough! I thought you'd come to your senses."

The man who had lost a brother put his shooter back in his belt.

Then the captain followed suit.

"Fill every bottle and flask you've got with water from that brook over there," said Griff Barton, turning to the men, as though nothing had happened. "We'll need water afore we git over ther sand."

The end of a rocky ridge was but a few yards distant, and from it a stream of water trickled.

The villainous crowd had plenty of fresh meat with them, they having shot a bear and two bucks the day before.

Not one of them, even to the leader, cared about crossing that hundred miles of white sand.

But they had made themselves marked men, and they all felt that they would be safe if they once got to the other side of the desert and into California.

In an hour more they had made all preparations for the journey.

"We're goin' to travel by ther sun an' stars," said Griff Barton. "That's somethin' you've got to remember, boys."

"You are ther one as is goin' to guide us," spoke up one of the men. "We're goin' ter leave it all to you."

"All right, then. It won't be ther first time that I've crossed ther Alkali desert," he said, with a smile.

They were just about to mount, after letting their horses drink their fill when a couple of covered wagons of the prairie schooner type appeared in sight.

Griff Bart cast a significant look at them.

Then he exclaimed in a voice just loud enough for all of them to hear:

"We want them wagons, boys!"

The villains understood.

"Hello, strangers!" called out the man driving the wagon that was in the lead, when he saw the band of men ready to mount and ride away.

"Hello!" answered Barton. "What brings yer this way?"

"We're on our way to Gray Plume. How much further have we got to skirt this blamed cactus?"

"Not very far, I reckon."

The two wagons had now come to a halt.

Barton very quickly saw that there were only five men on horseback and two who were driving the wagons.

That made seven, all told, in the party.

He resolved to take the wagons from them, and if they resented it, to kill them.

He cast a look at his men which meant to get ready.

Suddenly Griff Barton covered the man in the wagon nearest him, and exclaimed:

"I reckon we'll take charge of these two wagons, strangers. They're just what we want in our business. Get down off that seat!"

The first word was scarcely out of his mouth when his eleven followers thrust out their shooters, covering the party.

The travelers were astounded.

One of them tried to explain that they were honest men, and that all they owned was in the wagons.

But that made no difference to the villainous leader of the band.

"We're a mighty bad crowd, strangers!" he said. "If you don't want to shuffle off this mortal coil, as they say in the theatres, jest git a mope on yer! Move mighty quick or we'll begin to shoot! A few more dead men added to our list won't hurt our feelings a bit. Now, then, git!"

The driver of the second wagon had not left his seat, and he suddenly made a bold attempt to escape.

He hit the leaders with his long-lashed whip, and yelled for them to go.

The instant the horses started one of the outlaws fired and shot the fellow dead.

Then, while two or three others caught the team and stopped them, Griff Barton let out an oath and dropped the other driver.

That was quite enough for the travelers.

They rode away as fast as their steeds could carry them.

The villains sent half a dozen shots after them, which took no effect, fortunately.

They only did it to hurry them along.

Barton was in high glee now.

"I guess we struck a streak of luck when this outfit came along, boys," he observed, as he proceeded to make an examination of what the two wagons contained.

"I reckon we did, Cap!" said Biffer, who was now very friendly toward the leader.

A search revealed the fact that the wagons contained a good supply of provisions, some mining tools, blankets and clothing, ammunition for both rifles and revolvers, and last, but not least, about seven hundred dollars in cash.

There were also two casks half filled with water, in addition to the cooking implements and supplies.

When Griff Barton had divided up the money according to his judgment—he keeping one-third of the amount himself—he ordered the barrels filled from the brook.

"We won't have to hurry over ther desert so now, boys," he remarked. "We kin give ther horses a drink to-night, as them barrels will hold all we want till we strike water ag'in."

The delay in starting caused by the arrival of the two

wagons took up just an hour, and then the villainous band, with another crime added to their list, boldly pushed their way through the prickly cacti and started over the dry white sand of the desert of alkali.

They kept on until noon, now traveling in what they thought was a straight line.

Griff Barton had given up the idea of making the trail a crooked one now, but, in spite of this fact, he had lost his bearings before he was on the sandy waste an hour.

They halted in a little group of hillocks that had become piled up by the freaks of many winds and went into camp.

While some of the men were kindling a fire from the wood they had brought with them in the wagons, Griff Barton ascended one of the sand hummocks and took a look around.

Though the sun was shining brightly, there was a sort of haze that seemed to cling to the surface of the ground, and as far as his eye could reach there was naught but sand—white sand that glimmered and sparkled in places as though mocking those who had dared to venture upon it.

"I reckon I made a fool of myself in startin'," muttered the villainous leader of the band of outlaws. "I never took my bearin's by ther sun. I don't even know what time it was. But I guess I won't make a miss of it, 'cause I've come across before. It would be bad work for us if we got to going north or south without knowin' it, though, blamed if it wouldn't."

Having come to this conclusion, he walked over to where the cooking was going on, and he was just in time to see one of his men come out of the wagons with a five gallon demijohn, which had not been discovered when the search through the belongings of the travelers had been made.

"Whisky, Cap!" cried the man who had found it.

"Git out!" was the reply.

"But it is, Cap."

"Lemme see."

Barton took the demijohn and found that it was whisky, sure enough.

"I reckon we'll enjoy this trip," he said, with a smile. "All hands have a drink."

CHAPTER III.

BUD AND THE BEAR.

When Bud, the darky, had become convinced that he had fallen in among people who would protect him he soon got in a jolly mood.

"Marsar, I'll play you a tune, if you want me to," he said.

"Go ahead," retorted Young Wild West. "I guess a little music won't hurt any of us just now."

The banjo was soon out of the bag.

It looked as though it had seen pretty hard times, but when Bud began tuning it our friends came to the conclusion that there was lots of music in it, for all that."

The next moment the darky was singing an old time plantation ditty, and strumming away at an accompaniment that made the echoes ring.

"White folks, Ise come down to see you;
Jest come down to sing a song,
An' to make the world so happy,
Ise brought ma old banjo along."

That was the way his song started, and he rendered it in such good shape that he was applauded roundly by the vigilants.

"He'll do to keep off ther blues," said Oll Gilpin to Wild.

"Yes," was the reply. "We'll have to take him with us, I suppose. It wouldn't do to leave him here in the wilderness. He can ride one of the horses that are riderless from the loss of your men."

"Sartin he kin, Young Wild West. What you say goes. An', anyhow, I would be puffectly willing for him to use two of the horses, fer that matter, even if you didn't suggest it."

After a rest of an hour, Wild ordered the darky to put away his banjo, and then they started on the trail of the outlaw band.

They had not followed it many miles before some of them began to get puzzled.

"This is about ther crookedest trail I ever was on," Cheyenne Charlie observed, as he scratched his head in a puzzled way.

"They are trying to throw us off," answered Wild. "For that reason we must follow it just as it goes."

"Of course," spoke up Jim Dart.

"Oh, I know that," Charlie said. "But it makes me mad to think ther measly coyotes could get such a thing in their heads. If we wuz to leave ther trail an' try to pick it up somewhere else we might make a big miss of it. Then they'd be gettin' further away all ther time, an' if it should come on to rain, we'd lose ther trail entirely."

"Well, I'm not worrying about it," declared Wild. "I have never lost a trail yet, and I don't propose to lose this one, crooked or not crooked."

When they reached the end of the ravine, where the villains had taken to the stream, it was quite easy for them to understand what had been done.

Young Wild West and his two partners knew exactly what they had done.

The thing now was for them to find where they had left the brook.

They rode along, Wild on one side and Charlie and Jim on the other, till finally they came to the flat rock where the horses of Griff Barton and his gang had left the water.

As smart as the villains had been, they could not fool Young Wild West.

In less than five minutes he had satisfied himself thoroughly that they had left the stream at that point.

The iron shoes of the horses had chipped off fragments of the rock in places, and the spots were plainly discernible to his practised eyes.

He dismounted and quietly followed along across the rock and soon found where the trail went on through the bushes, back in the direction of the mouth of the ravine.

As soon as Cheyenne Charlie saw this he got out of patience.

"Confound ther measly coyotes!" he exclaimed. "What in blazes has got over 'em? They're takin' an awful lot of trouble to make us lose ther trail, it seems. I never seed such a crooked trail in my life."

"The fellow leading them is a pretty sly sort of a chap, I guess," remarked Wild. "But just let him go on; we'll catch them, see if we don't."

"There is nothing like confidence!" spoke up Jim.

"You bet there isn't," was the reply. "Confidence is half the battle, every time."

Though they certainly did not gain on the men they were pursuing, Young Wild West and his partners managed to follow the trail, in spite of the efforts of Griff Barton to fool them.

When they halted that night for a rest they were within less than twenty miles of the villains, but they had traveled over a lot of ground that day, and were pretty well tired out.

One thing, they knew that the outlaws would be compelled to rest about as often as they did.

The evening was well advanced when they started a fire near a running brook to cook their supper.

Bud had learned to make himself at home by this time, and though his ambition was not likely to be the means of killing him, he assisted in the duties that camping out involved.

Shortly after the fire had been started and the coffee put on, the darky took a walk along the brook on his own account.

He had not been gone more than five minutes when the inmates of the camp were startled by hearing a series of wild shrieks, followed by a crashing in the bushes.

Cheyenne Charlie was the first to grab his rifle and start in the direction the sound had come from.

"That noise was made by a bear; or else I'm mighty mistaken!" he exclaimed. "A bear is chasin' ther coon as sure as yer live!"

His remarks were addressed to Wild, who had started right after him.

"I'm of the same opinion, Charlie," was the reply.

The next instant there was a yell louder than before, followed by the words:

"Oo! To de good Lor' sake! Save me!"

It was no other than Bud who was making the noise.

"What's ther trouble there?" called out the scout.

"Hurry up, Marsar! A bear is done climbin' up a tree arter me!"

Charlie chuckled.

He liked a little fun, and he also liked to hunt bears.

The next minute he reached a little open space, and by the aid of the starlight he saw a big, cumbersome creature slowly ascending a tree.

He could not see the darky at all, but guessed that he was pretty close to the top of the tree.

Cheyenne Charlie did not bother to shoot the bear, but, drawing his keen-edged hunting knife, he darted to the tree, Wild being right behind him, and Jim Dart and some of the men following from the camp.

"I'll attend to ther critter, Wild," said the scout, and then, leaping upward, he caught one of the hind legs of the bear in a vise-like grip.

An angry growl came from bruin as he felt himself being pulled downward, and then he made a powerful effort to continue his way up the tree.

But the scout's weight was altogether too much for him, and his claws began to slip.

Charlie heard the sounds and, with his toes just touching the ground, he waited until he felt the big animal coming.

There was some more ferocious growling, and then the bear released its hold.

Down it came with a thud that almost jarred the ground, Cheyenne Charlie jumping nimbly out of the way.

The bear had no sooner landed than the scout bent over him and plunged his knife deep into the left side.

Charlie never missed when he had such a chance as that.

The blade pierced the big creature's heart, and it rolled over in the agonies of death.

"My!" said Charlie; "I'm blamed if he ain't a big feller. A cinnamon bear, an 'an old one at that."

One of the men came running up with a burning firebrand just then, and when he saw the bear lying on the ground he looked at the scout in admiration.

"You killed him with a knife, did you?" he asked.

"Yes," was the rejoinder.

"It wasn't necesary to take that risk, was it?"

"No. I could have dropped him with a bullet if I had wanted to."

"But you caught hold of his hind legs and pulled him down and then put your knife in him?"

"That's right, pard."

"That's what some one jest told me, but I wouldn't believe it."

"That's nothin'. I just dote on tacklin' bears."

"You like it."

"Yes. It's what I call sport to tackle a bear with a good huntin' knife to back you up."

"Well, it may be sport for you, but it wouldn't be for me. I'd sooner keep at a safe distance and plug away with bullets."

Young Wild West was now at the foot of the tree.

"Come on down, Bud!" he called out.

"Is dat you, Marsar Wild West?" came from above.

"Yes."

"Am de b'ar dead?"

"Yes, as dead as a mackerel!"

"An' it am safe fo' me to come down?"

"Yes, come on down and tell us how you came to be treed by the bear."

"All right, sar; Ise comin' right down, sar."

"You can have some of the bear's meat for breakfast to-morrow morning, and thus get square with him for scaring you."

"For de great goodness. Dat will be gettin' squar' on him, won't it, sar?"

"As sure as you live it will."

"Ise guess—"

That was all "Marsar Higgins' nigger who done run away from de plantation" said just then.

He made a miss of catching hold of a branch and came downward with a crash.

He hit so many limbs that his fall was broken considerably, and as he hit the last one and bounded over it Wild caught him about the middle, and giving him a whirl, landed him on his feet as though he had jumped the whole distance.

"Gracious!" he cried, with affected surprise. "That was an awful jump you made, Bud."

"Yes, sar, I know it was, but I done make up my mind to do it, and when Ise make up my mind to do a thing I gen'lly does it, sar."

"Then you mean to say that you jumped down on purpose?" said Cheyenne Charlie.

"Ob course I did, sar."

"All right. If I had known you were such a liar as that I would have let the bear climbed the tree and chewed you up."

Everybody laughed at this, and Bud remained strangely silent.

He had no idea just how it was that he came to land on his feet so lightly after falling so far, and he thought that he might as well claim that he jumped on purpose.

But he now realized that no one believed that he had.

And he concluded to drop the subject.

Charlie got the assistance of some of the men and the carcass of the bear was dragged into camp.

The darky presented a rather bedraggled appearance when he got into the light of the campfire.

"Now, then, Bud," said Wild to him, "just tell us how you came to be treed by the bear."

"I done walk a little ways by the brook, a-thinkin' of de happy days near New Orleans, whar I was born, sar; an' all at once I hear a growl. I look aroun' den, an' seen de b'ar wiakin' at me, as much as to say: 'I want you, Bud; I need you to make a supper! Den I lights fo' de fust tree I seen, sar, an' I done some hollerin' I spees."

"That's all of it, then?" queried Charlie.

"Yes, sir. All that happened before you came, sar."

"An' then you jumped down ther tree and landed on your feet?"

"You must hab seen what I done, sah."

Here was a chance for another laugh, and the men were not slow to accept it.

They all felt that the darky was quite an acquisition to their party.

After this incident things calmed down in the camp, and the night passed without anything occurring to disturb them.

At daylight they were up and getting breakfast, so they could resume the crooked trail they were following.

CHAPTER IV.

THE TRAIL OVER THE DESERT.

When our friends resumed the trail after they had put away a substantial breakfast, in which the meat from the bear slain by Charlie the night before figured, they found it was quite plain.

It looked as though the outlaw gang were no longer trying to conceal where they went.

They rode along at a good clip for an hour without once losing the crooked trail, which in one instance led in a complete circle.

Then they lost it for a few minutes, but the keen knowledge of woodcraft that Young Wild West possessed enabled him to find it again.

Then they started along in the zig-zag irregular way of the trail until about ten o'clock, when they suddenly sighted a small party of horsemen approaching.

Old Gilpin declared that they belonged to the outlaw gang they had been following, but one glance at the men convinced Wild that they were honest fellows, and that they had experienced some recent hard luck.

He had a way of reading people pretty accurately, and he seldom made a mistake in the impression he first got.

"Hello, strangers!" he called out. "You look worried. What is the trouble?"

"We are worried," replied the leader of the party, "and I reckon we have cause to be worried. A gang of thieves held us up this morning and robbed us of two wagons and the teams with them, and shot two men that belonged to our crowd."

"Is that so?" exclaimed our hero. "What sort of a crowd was it?"

Then the man, who was no other than the spokesman of the little band of travelers who had suffered at the hands of Griff Barton's gang, gave them a minute description of the villains.

They had been riding to get away from the gang, so they said, and they figured that if the villains had not left the spot where the hold-up had taken place, they were not more than ten miles off.

"That's ther gang we're trailin', sure enough," said the leader of the vigilants. "Well, I reckon we'll soon have 'em now."

"They are a desperate lot," averred the man who had been selected by his five companions to act as a sort of captain.

"I know they are. They killed three men an' two wimmen an' a child over in Gray Plume, an' that's what we're huntin' 'em for. I reckon we won't leave their trail till ther last one of 'em bites ther dust."

"I reckon we won't," spoke up Cheyenne Charlie. "Seven of 'em has gone under since we met this here vigilance committee."

"Is that so?" replied the man, whose name, by the way, was Sol Ellis.

"Yes, that's correct," explained Gilpin. "These three gents are whirlwinds, you can bet. They are Young Wild West and his two pard, Cheyenne Charlie and Jim Dart. They kin lick any ten men that ever breathed breath, they kin."

Our hero smiled at the recommendation they were receiving from the vigilant.

But he was very earnest and surely meant just what he said.

The victims of the robbery were very glad to fall in with the party, and when Wild told them that he guessed that there would be no great trouble in getting their horses and wagons back they were pleased beyond measure.

"We will help you all you can," Sol Ellis said. "None of us are Westerners, you know, and that probably is the reason that we were tools enough to allow the gang to get the drop on us."

"Oh, they were too many for you, anyway," remarked Jim Dart. "There must be a dozen of them left."

"Just twelve. I counted them."

"Which could be wiped out by them three fellers alone," whispered Gilpin to the man.

Gilpin had learned to regard our three friends as something out of the ordinary, and he was not slow to show his admiration of them.

"Just lead us back to the spot where they held you up," our hero said to Sol Ellis. "It may be that we can overtake them before they get away."

"All right," was the reply. "They were camped right on the edge of the desert—right among the prickly cactus—when we come upon 'em."

"And how long since you left them?"

"A trifle over an hour, I should say."

"Well, the chances are that they have moved on. But we can hurry along and find out, anyhow."

Five minutes later they were in motion, the addition of the six men making their party quite a large one.

But it made no difference to Young Wild West how large or how small the party was.

He would have tackled the outlaws if only his two partners were with him, for it was not numbers that he depended upon, but accurate shooting.

Neither lie, nor Cheyenne Charlie or Jim Dart ever wasted a bullet unless they did it purposely.

Sol Ellis led them along the trail they had made in coming that way, and in a trifle less than an hour they reached the spot where the villains had camped.

But it was deserted now, though the smouldering embers of a fire told that it had not been vacated very long.

"I don't like ther looks of this country," observed Charlie, as he looked at the great sandy waste and shook his head. "Wild, kin it be that them fellers have started to go across?"

"Everything points that way," was the reply. "I don't like the looks of it, either, Charlie, but if Griff Barton and his gang can cross the desert of alkali, we can. We have started in on this crooked trail now, and we are going to follow it to the end."

"That's the way to talk!" spoke up Jim Dart, who had overheard the conversation. "Well, if the outlaws have started across the alkali waste they must be heading for the California line, and as that is where we are bound, we will be losing no time when we are following them."

"That's right enough," said the scout. "But it don't seem to me that ther gang would take to this sand to get away. I heard it said in Yuma that it was a good hundred miles across here."

"Well, suppose it is? They could make the distance in a couple of days, couldn't they?"

"Not with wagons they couldn't."

"They could by putting in the part of a night," Wild said; "and if their horses do not give out."

"An s'pose they got lost in the desert?"

"It would be rather bad for them in that case."

"I reckon it would. An' supposin' we should git lost while following this blamed crooked trail?"

"We have got to run our chances."

"Well, don't think that I am goin' ter be the one ter back out. I ain't talkin' this way 'cause I'm afraid, or anything like it; I was jest expressin' my thoughts, that's all."

"We will examine the trail and find out whether they did start across the desert," said Wild, after a pause. "It may be that they only rode over the alkali a little way to lose us."

"The wagon tracks will show, anyhow," answered the scout.

Leaving the rest where they were, Wild, Charlie and Jim rode ahead and soon reached the commencement of the white, burning sand.

There was the trail, as plain as day.

And it went directly west, too.

"They have gone this way, as sure as two and two are four!" declared our hero. "We may as well get ready to follow the trail. It may be that it will no longer be a crooked one now."

"Ther straighter it is, the better," said the scout.

Young Wild West rode back to the men, who were taking a rest at the side of the brook.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I am of the opinion that the outlaws have started across the desert for the purpose of reaching the California border. We have been following a very crooked trail so far; now it becomes our duty to make our horses kick up the alkali dust for awhile. It is a trifle over a hundred miles across this desert, and if we are compelled to go all the way over, or only half way, it will be the same. We must have a supply of water to take with us. How are you going to manage it?"

Nearly all of the men had flasks and canteens, so as far as they were concerned, they could take enough with them to last the journey over.

But their horses—there was the thing!

It was finally decided that they should give the animals all they could drink, and then start out and try to make the trip as quickly as possible.

Though the horses would no doubt suffer from thirst without any water for a period of thirty-six hours, they would in nowise be endangered by it.

In half an hour they had filled every available thing they had to hold water and had swallowed as much as they could hold themselves.

Then they let the horses drink long and deep, and they were ready to be off.

Young Wild West figured that every minute counted now, so he gave the word to be off.

Picking their way carefully along to escape the sharp thorns of the caeti that grew in such abundance at the edge of the desert, they soon reached the sea of shimmering sand.

The trail left by the wagons was as plain as could be wished for, and they rode along at a good gait.

But the villains had more than two hours start of them, and that meant a whole lot in such cases.

Though the wagons could not travel as fast as they were riding, they would be a long time in being overtaken.

Wild figured that the villains were not more than two hours ahead of them, and that being the case, he hoped to overtake them before darkness set in.

He knew they must not delay an instant, so he kept right at it, the men following him as though it was a matter of fact that they must do so.

When the sun was beginning to near the line of the western horizon Cheyenne Charlie suddenly pointed ahead.

"Look there!" he cried. "If a fight ain't goin' on over there I'm a lame prairie dog, that's all!"

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when the reports of firearms reached them.

Though indistinct, they could hear them well enough.

"Forward, boys!" exclaimed Young Wild West. "We have run our game to cover. We have an hour before sunset, and in that time we will settle accounts with the murderous robbers!"

CHAPTER V.

THE THIEVES FALL OUT.

The finding of the demijohn of whisky was hailed with delight by the members of the outlaw band.

They had disposed of all the liquor they had brought with them before making the raid on the town of Gray Plume, and their long ride across the desert put them in just the humor for the fiery stuff.

Many of them were not satisfied to make the journey across the sandy waste, too, and when the whisky was passed around, and they began to feel its effects, they proceeded to talk on the subject.

Chief among these was Biffer, the man who had lost a brother.

He had been whispering to two or three of the men all afternoon that Griff Barton was doing wrong in taking them across the desert.

And after they had put in some eight hours of the journey these fellows believed that Biffer was right.

But they plied the whisky in them just the same, and in a few minutes it began to tell on them.

In fifteen minutes from the time they first went to the demijohn Griff Barton had lost control of nearly all of them.

Biffer was trying hard to get the majority of the men on his side, but there was another fellow who seemed to be making better headway.

He was named Matsen, and what he did he did secretly.

The result was that there were three factions in the band in less than no time.

And Matsen, who was in favor of traveling on through the darkness of the night, had the majority with him.

Pretty soon a quarrel started between Griff Barton and Biffer.

Both drew their revolvers and began firing. At the third shot Biffer fell wounded in the thigh. Then two of the men interfered.

Barton at once turned his revolvers upon them and, having better luck than when he shot at Biffer, dropped them both.

While all this was taking place, Matsen made for the wagons, followed by the rest of the crowd.

As the horses had not been unhitched, they got them in motion before Griff Barton was aware of what was happening.

The villain was bent on punishing Biffer, and he did not note the fact that he was the only one standing on the desert within a radius of a hundred yards.

Had he looked off to the left he would have seen the rest of the villains and the two wagons hurrying off over the sandy waste.

And had he turned to the right he would have seen two forms creeping toward him, dodging behind the hummocks of sand as they came.

They were no other than Young Wild West and Jim Dart, while in the distance Cheyenne Charlie was holding their horses.

The leader of the outlaws picked up a long-lashed whip that had been used by one of the teamsters and cut the wounded man about the neck.

"I'm going to lash you, Biffer!" he cried, with flashing eyes. "I'm goin' ter lash you, an' then leave you here fer ther vultures ter feed on!"

Young Wild West and Jim Dart crept a little nearer.

"You'll leave me here fer ther vultures ter feed on, will yer?" screamed the wounded man. "Then you'll die first, Griff Barton!"

His left hand, clutching a revolver, was raised.

Barton had not figured on Biffer being able to do any more shooting, and when he saw the weapon pointed at him he sprang aside.

Crack!

His move had been a lucky one for him, for the bullet clove the air right where he had been standing.

Swish!

Down came the whip, and the lash catching Biffer around the wrist, it knocked the shooter from his hand.

"Hands up, you scoundrel!"

The command was repeated, and the tone of voice told him that it was dangerous to even hesitate any longer.

The whip dropped from his hand, and then they went up mechanically.

In the twinkling of an eye Jim Dart sprang forward and disarmed Barton.

"You have about reached the end of your rope!" he said.

"I don't know," was the response. "Who are you young fellers that you are botherin' your time with me? This ain't nothin' to do with you, is it?"

"Oh, I don't know about that," spoke up Wild. "We started out to help him hunt you fellows down, that's all."

"Have a little pity on me, won't yer?" cried Biffer, in a pleading voice. "I don't want to be left here to die an' be eat up by the vultures."

"It seems hard to die, don't it?" answered Dart, with a sneer. "But you didn't think that way when you murdered the people over in Gray Plume, did you?"

Wild now called out for Cheyenne Charlie to come over and fetch the horses.

As soon as he saw the scout coming he turned to Jim and said:

"Just guard these fellows, Jim. Here come the rest of the men behind Charlie. I will meet him and get my horse and then send a couple of them over here to help you tie these fellows up, while we chase up the wagons and the rest of the gang."

"All right," answered Jim, and then Wild started on a run to meet those who were hurrying to the spot.

Our three friends had approached the camp of the outlaws alone, leaving the vigilant and the others behind at a safe distance.

When they did this they had not expected that the wagons would get into motion.

The thing had not turned out like Young Wild West had figured it would.

While they were creeping along, keeping the sand hummocks between them and the villains, the biggest part of them were sneaking away.

Wild was soon on the back of the sorrel and then, telling two of the men to go over where Jim Dart was, he led the way in the wake of the escaping scoundrels.

"There are only eight of them left," he said, "so we won't be long in settling matters now."

Just then the sun, which had just touched the line of the horizon, was suddenly obscured, and it suddenly became dark.

"What's ther matter?" queried Cheyenne Charlie, in alarm.

"A sand storm is coming!" exclaimed Wild. "The wind is blowing the sand in dense clouds this way, and that is what shuts the sun off. We must dismount and lie down at once."

"Can't we git baek to Jim?"

"No! We haven't time. See, it is almost upon us!"

Though he knew that there was great danger attached to such a storm, Wild dismounted as coolly as though it was an everyday occurrence.

"Get a move on you, boys!" he called out. "Force your horses to lie down so their heads are pointing away from the squall. Then lie close to them until it passes over. A regular cyclone is coming, and it's going to make the sand fly!"

The horses being trained to lie down when commanded to, they got them where they wanted them in a jiffy.

But they were not a moment too soon.

The fierce squall, or whatever it could be called, was traveling toward them with the speed of an express train.

Just as they dropped behind their horses for shelter it reached them.

It was with the greatest difficulty that they got their heads out so they could breathe once more, and when they did the air was so full of flying sand that it was anything but pleasant to breathe.

Finally Young Wild West was able to see about him for a short distance.

What a scene!

Had our friends been on a raft in the midst of a storm-tossed sea it would not have been a more desolate aspect.

The heaps of white sand that had been scattered here and there before the squall struck them were no longer visible, though many others had formed in various places.

For the first time in a long while Young Wild West felt uneasy.

As he looked around the alkali waste, he knew only too well that they had been lost on the alkali desert.

He knew it would simply be wasting time to travel during the night.

The only thing to do, then, was to remain right where they were till morning, and hope that the sun would show itself to guide them.

What had become of the outlaws he did not know or care just then.

He wanted to find Jim Dart and the two men who had been left guarding the two captured scoundrels as soon as possible.

He knew that they were not out of hearing.

Just as Wild raised his rifle to fire a shot to signal to them he heard the report of a rifle in the distance.

Then he answered it.

"Are you all alive, boys?" he asked, turning to the men.

"I reckon we are," was the reply from Cheyenne Charlie.

"Well, that's good. That was either Jim, or the gang we are after which fired the shot which I just answered. It is hard to tell which, as I have lost all idea of direction."

"It came from over there," said the scout, pointing his finger the way he thought.

Just then another shot was fired, followed by a faint call.

"That's Jim, all right!" cried Charlie, and then he let out his old familiar whoop in answer to the call.

"Charlie, we are in for it!" and Wild shook his head as he spoke.

"I reckon so," was the laconic rejoinder.

"If we'd stayed off ther desert until after this sand-storm we'd been better off, wouldn't we?" spoke up Oll Gilpin.

"I guess we would have been better off," answered Charlie. "If we ain't mighty lucky we'll never see grass ag'in."

The rest of the men looked at each other.

It frightened them to hear such talk as that from one of Wild West's partners.

Our hero noticed it, and he hastened to reassure them.

"I guess we will have no trouble in getting off the desert all right," he said. "But I don't think it would be advisable to move from here to-night, though. When the sun comes up in the morning we can easily lay out a course, you know."

"That's so."

"How about ther gang we was huntin'?" drawled the man Gallop.

"I guess it will be easy enough to find them. There will certainly be something left of the wagons, you know."

"That's so."

Pretty soon a human form came into sight in the gathering darkness.

As Wild looked he saw that it was Jim Dart.

He was alone and without his horse, even!

"That's Jim comin'!" said Charlie, in a low tone.

"I know it," was the reply.

"I wonder what's ther matter?"

"I don't know."

"He ain't even got his horse with him."

"I can see that."

"Horse must have smothered in the sand."

"Quite likely."

"An' ther two men with him—an' ther captives."

"They must have gone under, too."

"Jim was mighty lucky, indeed, if that happened."

"I should say he was. But here he is. Now we will learn just what happened to him."

At this juncture Jim Dart came running up to them.

"How many are left of you?" he asked.

"We are all here yet," answered Wild.

"You are very lucky, then. I am the only one left out of the five of us who were over there. Even the horses are gone!"

"Sand buried them so they couldn't get out?"

"I don't know. I was whirled over like a top for a minute or two, and when I finally got upon my feet and looked around there was not the least sign of any of the men or the horses, except a rifle, which I left sticking in the sand to mark the spot."

CHAPTER VI.

FORTY-THREE MILES TO THE BONEYARD.

When the sandstorm came up Griff Barton knew what to do better than any of those with him.

He pulled the horse, which was standing but a few feet from him, to the ground without saying a word to Jim Dart, or the other two men who had come to help guard him.

They had not taken the precaution to bind the villain, and when they saw what he did they followed his example.

There were two or three other horses standing about, and they were forced to lie down with the rest.

Then they got down and lay close to the animals.

Griff Barton had experienced such a thing before, and he got so he could get every particle of air that it was possible for him to.

When the wind hit the hummock near by every ounce of sand there was in it was thrown upon them, it seemed.

As it struck Barton felt himself going downward with a rush—down into the very earth itself!

What this meant the villain could not even conjecture, but he felt that his last moment had come.

Down he went, with tons of sand pressing upon him.

He must have dropped twenty or thirty feet when suddenly he shot out into an open space where it was as dark as a pocket.

What little breath there was in him was pretty well jarred out of him when he struck a hard, smooth surface and landed in a confused heap.

Gasping and spluttering, he lay there for perhaps three minutes.

Then he suddenly found that he could breathe.

"I wonder where I am, anyhow?" he muttered, as he raised upon his elbow and strove to look around.

It was just then that he felt a hand touch him.

"Hello!" he called, his voice sounding hollow and unnatural in that remarkable underground place.

"Hello!" came the reply.

"Hello!" cried another voice close at hand. "Where are we—does any one know?"

"We're in our grave, I reckon," answered Griff Barton, as he got upon his feet. "We've been buried afore we got a chance to die."

His words sounded ominous enough, for they had fallen into a cavernous place where sounds made freaks of themselves.

There was a silence of fully a minute, and then one of the three who were alive in the underground place lighted a match.

But it would not stay lighted, for there was such a draught there that the flame became extinguished at once.

The party who had lighted the match was Sol Ellis, the leader of the party who had been traveling with the wagons.

He and one of the vigilants had come to help Jim Dart take care of Barton and the wounded man.

And they had dropped from the sandy surface of the desert into a cavern where there was a strong draught of air.

It was wonderful!

Ellis was a man who had a pretty good head on him, while he was pretty well read, at the same time.

He was the first of the three to reason that it was a very lucky thing that had happened to them.

He had not the least idea but that they could get out of the place.

Anyhow, they could breathe there, and that was a thing that was conclusive proof that there must be an outlet to the cavern.

"I think we ought to be thankful that we dropped into this place," he said.

"Mebbe we oughter," answered Griff Barton. "But I don't know whether to be or not."

"You are the prisoner, are you not?" queried Ellis.

"I reckon I am, or was, for it hadn't ought to count since we've landed in such an unearthly place as this here is," answered the villain.

"Well, we won't count it that way, then, for the present."

"All right. I don't know who you are, but you seem to be a pretty cool one, so s'pose you find a way for us to git out of here."

"Very well. The first thing to do is to get a light."

He struck another match as he spoke, and shaded it with his coat.

This time it remained burning, and the three had a

chance to look at each other and, at the same time, catch a glimpse of their surroundings.

They found that they were in what appeared to be the beginning of a rather wide passage that led downward.

Back of them was a bank of sand, and overhead was nothing but rock.

"We are the only ones here, that's certain," said Ellis. "Jim Dart and the wounded man did not come down here with us."

"Nor ther horses, either," spoke up the other man.

"Well, it seems that we're better off than them, then—that is, if we are sure of gittin' out when we want to," observed Griff Barton.

Ellis shook his head, as he lighted another match.

"I can't see a possible way of getting out," he said.

"Not by the way we came in, you mean," spoke up the vigilant.

"Yes, that is what I mean. It strikes me that we can get out by following the passage. It surely leads somewhere, or there would not be air in here."

"If we git out at all, we've got to git out by ther way we come in," said Griff Barton, shaking his head doggedly.

"We'll strike a light and see about it."

Ellis took off his coat and, taking the things it had in the pockets and transferring them to those in his waist-coat and trousers, he began rolling it up and stretching it out.

He did this in the darkness and, hearing him at work at something, the others asked him what he was up to.

"I am going to make a torch of my coat," he answered. "It is an old one, anyhow, and is pretty well greased up from bear fat, so I guess it will burn."

"That's a good idea!" exclaimed Barton. "Hurry up an' git it made, so we kin see what we are doin'."

Ellis did hurry up.

He pulled and twisted and knotted the garment until it lost all semblance to a coat.

Then he managed to light a match and set one of the twisted ends on fire.

Though it did not burn with much of a blaze, it gave a light sufficient for them to see what they were doing.

As soon as he could see, Griff Barton began digging at the sand in what seemed to be the end of the passage.

It could be removed readily enough, and as soon as he dug it more caved in.

"You couldn't get out that way in a month," said Ellis, shaking his head. "We are fifteen or twenty feet below the surface of the desert, and it is not likely that we could dig our way out if we had shovels. I think we had better follow the passage and try to get out that way, instead of wasting our time digging here. If we fail in that, we can start in and dig there as a last resort. It won't take us long to find whether we can get into the open air by going through the passage."

"Go ahead, then!" cried Barton. "I'll let you be ther leader in this game."

It was wonderful to see how much confidence Ellis had that the passage would take them out.

Not one out of a hundred would have thought that way.

But the fact of his being imbued with the idea made the others hopefully side with him.

Though the man was not what might be called a brave man when it came to fighting it out with weapons, he was courageous in another sense, while, at the same time, he was resourceful and hopeful both.

Ellis, with the improvised torch in his hands, started boldly through the passage, followed by Griff Barton and the other man.

When they covered about a hundred yards and found that the passage, though a little crooked, ran almost level, it occurred to the outlaw leader that his weapons had been taken from him when he had been captured by Young Wild West.

"Say!" he said to Ellis. "Don't you think I ought to have a shooter and knife? Suppose we meet some one in this blamed underground place what wants to put up a fight ag'in us?"

"It will be time enough to provide you with weapons when such a thing happens," retorted the leader of the trio.

"You think so, hey?"

"Yes."

"What do you think about it?" and the villain turned to the vigilant.

"I reckon as how you don't need any shooter and knife," was the quick answer.

"Oh, you do, do yer?"

"Yes, I do, do yer! You'd better not get ugly about it, either."

The vigilant was not a very big man, but he was a spunky one, just the same, and he thought about as much of the outlaw captain as he did of a snake.

Still, as they were in common peril or danger, he had not expressed himself against him before.

Though told not to get ugly about it, Barton did it, after all.

His eyes glowed like coals of fire in the weird, uncanny light made by the slow burning coat, and the expression on his face told the vigilant that he had better be on his guard.

But he was equal to the occasion, however.

"See here, Griff Barton," he said, speaking quite savagely, "I'd just as leave shoot you as not. Now, if you go to trying anything treacherous on me, off goes the top of your head!"

For an answer the outlaw made a leap forward and caught the man's wrist just as a revolver appeared in his hand.

There was a sharp crack as the shooter was accidentally discharged, followed instantly by a detonating report, the shock of which threw all three of them to the ground.

Ellis was the first man to get upon his feet.

"Now, you see what you have done!" he cried, as he picked up the improvised torch, which was still burning, "you have shut off all chance of getting back by the way we came. That shot caused a fall of rock. The passage has caved in until it is now a mass of solid rock. Now our only chance is to go ahead!"

"I didn't do the shootin'!" retorted Griff Barton, with a growl. "It was ther other feller what done it. I guess he got ther worst of it, too. He lies there putty still."

"No, I didn't get the worst of it, either," was the quick reply. "I ain't hurt a particle, but ther shot did send me flyin', I'll admit."

"And I've got ther shooter what went off!"

This was indeed true.

Griff Barton had in some manner got his hands on the weapon as he was in the act of getting up, and he now stood with it leveled at the vigilant.

Then the true courage of Ellis asserted itself.

He knew that their situation was a desperate one, and he felt that unless Barton was kept under things would be much worse.

With remarkable quickness he covered the villain with his revolver and exclaimed:

"You've got to drop that shooter or die right now!"

There was a deadly meaning in his voice when he said this, and realizing that he had little chance of winning, Barton let the revolver fall to the ground.

"There!" he exclaimed, sullenly. "Does that suit yer?"

The little man quickly sprang forward and possessed himself of his weapon.

Then he dealt Barton a blow in the face with his clenched fist, which was so sudden and unexpected the villain went down in a heap.

"I can't hardly keep from killin' yer, yer hound!" he cried. "You can jest bet that yer blood will be on my hands before we git out of this scrape!"

"Easy now!" cautioned Ellis. "Take a look around you and offer a suggestion, instead of quarreling."

This seemed to bring them to their senses.

Barton got up without a word and looked back into the passage.

The two showed signs of the greatest alarm, but he remained perfectly cool.

"Come on!" he cried. "We must get out of here."

He started ahead at a swift walk, for there was ample space to move along in any fashion one chose, the top being high enough to pass a man on horseback easily enough.

Ellis had not covered more than a hundred yards when he suddenly came to a halt, his jaw dropping in dismay as he did so.

Before him on the ground sat a grinning skeleton!

But that was not all! Scrawled with chalk on the black rock directly over the top of the grawsome object was the following legend:

"13 Miles to the Boneyard—Hurry up!"

CHAPTER VII.

LOST ON THE ALKALI DESERT.

Young Wild West was much impressed with what Jim Dart said about the disappearance of his companions and the prisoners.

"They must be buried under a hill of sand," he ventured to say.

"No," said Jim. "There is no hill there. It is as smooth as the surface of a calm lake."

"An' ther horses are gone; too, you said," spoke up Cheyenne Charlie.

"Yes. Everything and everybody but myself and ther rifle."

"Funny, ain't it?"

The scout was puzzled.

But the vigilants and the other men were puzzled, too.

The only one in the party to show signs of being frightened was Bud, the darky.

To him there was something uncanny in the disappearance of the men and horses.

"Dey done blow away fo' suah!" he declared.

"It mought be that they did," drawled Gallop. "But I don't hardly believe it, though. Spooks is what done it."

"Oh, Lor'!" groaned the darky. "I done want to git home."

"You stand a poor chance just now," said Dart. "Better pluck up courage and make the best of it."

They talked about the remarkable occurrence until it was totally dark.

Then, as Young Wild West cast his gaze about him he suddenly espied a fire blazing off to the left.

"There's some one over there!" he called out to his companions. "They've started a fire."

"It must be them that have the wagons," observed the scout.

"Yes, and we may as well ride over there and take the wagons away from them."

"Good!" exclaimed one of the owners of the outfits.

"Come on!" exclaimed Wild. "There is no use delaying this matter. Those fellows have plenty of water, and our horses need some badly."

They all got in the saddle and headed for the fire, which was unquestionably a campfire.

Wild cautioned them to make as little noise as possible, and as the sand was soft and yielding, they got within fifty yards of the fire without being observed by those around it.

Our hero carefully counted the men there, and the best he could do was to find four.

The two wagons were there, but they were complete

nothing but skeletons.

Young Wild West walked boldly into the camp of the villains.

"Good evening, gentlemen," he said, pleasantly. "I hope I find you comfortable and well after the sand storm."

The four men, who had been busy trying to cook something over the fire, sprang to their feet.

"Hello!" said one of them. "Who are you?"

"Oh, I belong to the party that has been following the crooked trail you made in getting here. Are you ready to surrender, or do you want to fight it out?"

The man who had spoken was Matsen, the fellow who had got the scoundrels to take the wagons and start off.

He looked at Wild for a moment and then, scratching his head, said:

"You ain't alone, are yer?"

"Can't you see whether I am or not?"

But he could not see. The light from the fire prevented him seeing far enough in the darkness to observe the rest of our friends.

"So you are goin' ter take us after all that's happened, then?" he asked.

"Yes."

"There's only four of us left of the eight that sneaked away while ther captain an' Biffer was quarrelin'. There might have been more if them other fellows hadn't mixed up in it and got shot fer their pains. There's only four of us left alive, and we've only got two horses between us. Ther rest of the critters got killed in ther big blow a little while ago, which is the worst blow I ever seen."

"It was a bad one, and no mistake. But the four of you will please hold up your hands now. I am in a little hurry, you know."

He had them covered in a twinkling, and with looks of dismay they obeyed his command.

"Come on, boys!" Wild called out. "I guess this is a much better place to spend the night than where we were. The wrecked wagons make it look a little more homelike, anyhow."

The men rode up with Jim Dart in advance, leading Wild's horse.

In a couple of minutes the surviving villains were relieved of their weapons and then tied to one of the wagon wrecks.

Then the owners of the wagons began to go through them.

"Two full barrels of water!" called out one of them.

"All right," answered Wild. "Give the horses a drink at once. They are nearly dead for the want of it."

Cheyenne Charlie superintended the watering of the horses.

He had an idea that it would be some little time before they got off the desert, and he was not going to allow the water to be wasted.

Consequently, he only gave the steeds about a third of what they would have swallowed had they been allowed to do so.

Noticing his followers to remain right where they were,

The owners of the wrecked wagons were rather dejected when they found that the vehicles were beyond repair.

"The bones of your outfit will rest here on the desert," said Young Wild West, with a smile.

"I suppose so," answered one of them, "and it may be that our bones stay here with them."

"That might be, but I have no idea of it."

"You think we will get off the desert all right, then?"

"I think our chances are excellent now."

"You mean because we have found water for the horses?"

"Yes."

"Well, I hope we do get away from the sandy spot."

Wild did not notice that the vigilants had drawn away in a bunch, and were talking very earnestly together.

But presently Oll Gilpin walked up to him and said:

"I reckon there's no use takin' them four fellers along with us. They'll only be drinkin' ther water that we might need before we git off ther desert."

"I guess I know what you mean," answered our hero. "But don't you think it would be a good idea to take them back to Gray Plume?"

"What's ther use? They've got to hang ennyhow, haven't they?"

"I suppose so. But how are you going to hang them here—there are no trees to be used for the purpose."

"There's more ways than one to kill a cat," said Gilpin, significantly.

"Yes. Have you decided what you want to do?"

"We've come to the conclusion by a unanimous vote that ther murderous skunks have got to die before sunrise. Of course, we meant to consult with you afore we done anything, though. Them fellers ain't fit to live, anyhow. They killed three of our best citizens, an' then they was hard-hearted enough to go and kill two wimmen an' a little child. Now, who kin say that they hadn't ought to be punished accordin' to our ways of doin' things in Arizony?"

"I have nothing to say," retorted Wild, turning away. "Your vigilance committee has been empowered to act by the citizens of your town, I suppose. It is not for me to tell you what to do."

"Thank you, Young Wild West," and Oll Gilpin hastened over to where his men were waiting in a group.

"They had an idea that I would interfere with them," said Wild to Charlie and Jim. "I don't know as I have any right to interfere. The villains are guilty of the crime charged against them, so the quicker they are off the earth the better."

Our three friends and the five men who had owned the wagons remained around the fire the outlaws had started, and proceeded to broil some meat and boil coffee, while the vigilants went over and untied the prisoners.

They dragged the wretches out on the sand in the darkness of the night.

Pitiful were their appeals for mercy, but there was none here for them.

They had been merciless themselves, and they could expect none from those hardy Westerners.

Our friends in the camp heard a volley fired a few minutes later, which was quickly followed by a smothered roar, as though an earthquake was in progress.

The vigilants hurried in with very pale faces.

"Did you hear that noise right after we fired?" asked Oll Gilpin.

"Yes," answered Wild; "what was it?"

"I don't know. It sounded as though somethin' had exploded under the ground."

"It did sound that way," spoke up Cheyenne Charlie. "I wonder if it was ther volley you fired that caused it?"

"That's what we'd like to know," said one of the men, who was evidently badly scared.

"It can't be said that ther outlaws didn't deserve bein' shot," observed another.

"Well, I don't know what could have caused the shock unless it was an earthquake," said Wild. "I don't think the shots you fired had anything to do with it, though. It just happened to occur as you fired the volley that finished the four murderers."

That settled the discussion for the time being, and all hands started in to get something to eat.

It had been settled that they were to remain there over night, and when the sun came up in the morning they would head for the spot where they had come upon the desert.

Wild figured that they were nearly half way across, too, but he felt that it would be best to stick to the vigilants and the rest till they got safely off and on their way to Gray Plume.

So he settled down to take things easy for the night.

It was the first night he had ever spent on a desert, and he afterwards stated that it was about the most lonesome place he had ever laid down to sleep in.

In spite of the fact that they were almost certain that there were none of the outlaws left alive, a watch was kept during the night.

Young Wild West was one of the first to wake in the morning, and when he got up he found it must have been daylight for a full hour or more.

But there was not the least sign of the sun!

The sky was cloudy and a sort of haze had settled upon the vast sea of land like a veritable fog, only it was dry and very penetrating.

"I don't like this," thought the boy, shaking his head. "If this kind of weather lasts very long there is no telling when we will get off the desert. It seems that the crooked trail we have been following has brought us into hard luck."

Pretty soon all hands were up.

Anxious, indeed, were the looks they cast at Young Wild West when they saw the condition of the weather.

"It is raining somewhere near by," said Wild, in answer to their silent queries. "It is coming down in torrents

over on the hills and prairie, but we won't get any of it here."

"And we won't have a chance to find where the sun is, either," said Cheyenne Charlie. "Which way are we goin' ter travel?"

"No way just now," was the reply. "There is no use of it. We could not tell which way to start out, and even if we could, how long could we keep on a straight course?"

"If we only had a compass!" observed Jim Dart.

"If!"

"This will teach us a lesson. We must have such a thing next time we start out from home."

Wild nodded his head, admitting that Jim spoke the truth.

They ate their breakfast in silence that morning.

They all knew that they were lost on the desert, and that was all there was to it.

While they had been revenged on the gang that had committed the crime in their town, the vigilance committee now came to the conclusion that they were paying well for following the crooked trail left by the villains.

After breakfast Wild told Charlie to see to it that the horses got a little water apiece, and then picking up his rifle, he started to take a walk.

"I'm not going more than a mile away," he said. "If you hear me shoot you will know that I am lost. An answering shot will show me the way to come."

"All right," answered Jim, who felt more like lying down to wait for the sun to come out than anything else.

In less than five minutes after Wild left them they heard the report of a rifle not far from them.

"He's got lost already," observed Jim, as he picked up his rifle and fired an answering shot.

But though they waited ten minutes, Young Wild West did not show up.

"Somethin's happened him!" exclaimed Cheyenne Charlie.

CHAPTER VIII.

A GREAT DISCOVERY.

Wild had not walked far from the camp when he suddenly came to a deep hole in the ground.

He had started out to learn what had caused the rumbling explosion of the night before, if he could, and when he came to the hole he gave a satisfied nod.

"I guess that hole was made when the explosion took place," he muttered. "It seems rather odd, though, that such a thing should happen. I wonder—"

That was all he said just then, for he had gone a little too close to the edge of the hole and the sand caved in, taking him down like a shot.

He landed feet first on a comparatively smooth rock

six or seven feet below, and then, as the sand ceased to cave any more, he felt perfectly safe.

But he concluded to discharge his rifle and bring some one there, knowing that it would be easier for him to get out if a lariat was thrown to him than it would be to fight against the caving sand.

He fired the shot and heard the answer.

Then he was about to fire again to let them know that something was wrong, when a startling thing happened.

The stone he was standing upon dropped from under him without the least warning, and down went Young Wild West out of sight!

He landed a dozen feet below with a shock that nearly took the breath from him, and the shower of dirt and small stones that came down with him caused him to relinquish his hold upon his rifle.

"I never heard of a well being on a desert!" he gasped. "But by the looks of it, I have certainly fallen in one. But it is a dry one, so there is no danger of me drowning."

He got up and, shaking the dust from his clothes, endeavored to reach upward.

But he could not catch hold of anything that would give him the least chance to climb upward.

After spending a couple of minutes in thought he turned his attention to the pile of dirt, and began digging for his rifle, which he knew was there somewhere.

But more debris than he had thought had tumbled down, and it was three or four minutes before he had succeeded in locating the weapon.

Once he caught sight of it, for there was sufficient light for him to see what he was doing, he was not long in fetching it to light.

"I guess I had better fire another shot," he thought, and pointing the muzzle of the rifle up through the well-like opening, he made sure that no one was at the top, and then pulled the trigger.

Crack!

As the report rang out there was a clattering of stones and dirt, and he was buried to his waist in a jiffy, while innumerable echoes came to his ears.

Then right before him Wild saw a passage extending downward and off as far as he could see in the light that came in from the top of the hole.

He managed to extricate himself from the mass of dirt, and then, curious to see what sort of a place he had fallen into, he stepped down into the passage.

"Well, well!" he exclaimed. "What does this mean, anyhow? This looks like a regular tunnel. Ah! what is that?"

Stooping, he picked up a piece of charred cloth. The sight of this puzzled him more than ever. What could it mean?

The puzzled boy carried his find to the light.

"It is a piece of some one's clothing," he muttered in a satisfied way. "Now then, it being such, there must have been some one down in this passage, and that not

very long ago, either; for this cloth has been on fire not many hours ago."

While he was speculating on the mysterious find he heard the unmistakable voice of Cheyenne Charlie calling his name.

"Hello, Charlie!" he answered. "Look out you don't fall down here. I am in the bottom of a well that is dry and has a passage running out from it to some place underground. Throw your lariat down here, if you have it, and I will let you pull me up. Don't get too close to the edge or it will cave in with you."

The warning must have been entirely lost upon Charlie, for the next instant there was the sound of a vast body of moving sand.

Young Wild West had an idea of what had happened, so he quickly got out of the way.

He was not an instant too soon, either, for about fifty tons of sand and dirt became dislodged, and the next thing he saw was a pair of legs kicking out furiously right before him.

At a risk of being kicked, he seized them and gave a mighty pull.

It was well he did so, for Cheyenne Charlie had been pretty well buried, and it would not have taken long to suffocate him.

"I told you not to come so near," said Wild, as he took the scout by both hands and shook him with delight.

"I didn't come so very near," was the reply, when he had found his breath. "I didn't get near enough to take a look inter ther hole, even. What kind of a place have I landed in, anyhow?"

"Well, by jingo! I believe we can get out quite easy now. There is nothing more than a hill to climb now. It is an easy slant."

"Let's git out, then. I don't like it much down here."

"See here what I found down there in that passage."

"What is it?"

"A piece of some one's clothing."

"An' it's been afire, too!"

"Yes."

"What in blazes does this mean?"

"That is what I would like to find out."

Cheyenne Charlie was so much interested now that he forgot where he was.

While the two stood there examining the piece of charred cloth they suddenly heard some one calling to them.

Looking up, they saw Jim Dart and Oll Gilpin coming down the sandy incline.

It did not cave any more, and they came down in safety.

Of course they were much puzzled at finding such a deep hole there.

But what was their surprise when Wild showed them the piece of burned cloth.

He told them all that had taken place since he had dropped so unceremoniously into the hole.

"Maybe there is something more in the passage," said Jim, who seemed eager to investigate. "We might find something that will explain how this came to be here."

"Well, what do you say if we look?"

"I am more than willing."

"Go ahead then," said Charlie. "I reckon it has caved in about all it kin now."

Wild at once stepped into the passage, followed by Dart, who did not show the least sign of uneasiness.

But Cheyenne Charlie and the leader of the vigilants were pretty nervous.

No doubt they were thinking of supernatural things just then.

The two boys had no sooner reached the spot where Wild had found the charred cloth than Jim exclaimed:

"Why, there are footprints in there! Was you in this place as far as that, Wild?"

"No," answered our hero. "I was not an inch further than where I am now."

Then he saw how it was that Jim had seen the footprints so readily.

The last cave-in had made more light in the place.

The ground in the passage was lightly sprinkled with damp sand, and as they looked at it closer they soon came to the conclusion that there was more than one person who had made the marks.

"I have it!" exclaimed Wild.

"What?" asked Jim, looking at him in amazement.

"I have found out who made these footprints, I think."

"Who, then, for gracious sake?"

"The men who disappeared when the sand storm struck you."

"Do you really think so, Wild?"

"I certainly do. They must have dropped down in this passage, and then the wind smoothed the sand and filled it in where they fell through."

"It might be."

"I feel certain that it is."

"Well, it is a wonderful thing, then."

"I should say it was."

"Say!" exclaimed Oll Gilpin. "Do you think our two men an' Griff Barton made them footprints?"

"That is just what I think," replied Wild.

"Well, one o' ther men was a little feller, and he had a mighty small foot, an' Griff Barton had a big hoof on him."

"Here are just ther marks to suit, then," said Jim. "Jove, it looks as though there had been a sort of a scuffle here, too."

Wild now concluded to advance into the passage a ways and see what could be found.

But he soon saw that it would be useless to do so without a light.

"I'll go and get a light," Charlie said. "I'll fetch some of ther men over, too, an' I'll have them bring their lariats, as they might be needed."

"All right!" called out Wild. "Hurry up, Charlie!"

The scout went up the incline of sand quite easily. Though he sank to his ankles, he was not long in getting to the sandy tract above.

He looked around him and found that there was no signs of the sun, though the haze had disappeared somewhat and he could see the camp dimly ahead of him.

He hastened over to where the men were waiting anxiously.

"What am de trouble, Marsar?" inquired Bud, the darky, who was pretty badly frightened at the prospect of things in general.

"We've found a way to leave ther blamed old desert," answered Charlie, with a chuckle. "We're goin' through a tunnel to reach ther land of trees an' grass an' flowers, Bud."

"Oh, wha' fo' you talk dat way, Marsar Charlie?" cried the darky, opening wide his eyes.

"Come over here and I'll show you," said the scout, as he got the lantern. "You fellers bring some lariats along, too."

Two minutes later the whole crowd was heading for the opening in the desert.

CHAPTER IX.

THE EXPERIENCE OF ELLIS.

Sol Ellis and his two companions looked at the skeleton and the inscription above it in silence.

The light made by the improvised torch was just uncertain enough to cause the scene to be weird in the extreme.

The face of Griff Barton was ghastly, and there was not the least doubt but that he felt that his time had nearly come.

The grinning skull of the relic of mortality gave a vivid suggestion of what he was soon to be.

The little vigilant was the first to speak.

With a shrug of his shoulders, he said:

"Bone yard, eh? I wonder what the fellow's doin' here, then?"

Barton turned a look of reproach upon the man.

"You ain't makin' fun, are you?" he said.

"No," and there was a slight twinkle in the eyes of the little man, "I ain't makin' fun; but it do seem funny that ther skeleton are here, when it are more's forty miles to the boneyard."

"It may be that he was there, and that he came back and wrote that on ther rock before he died," observed Ellis, speaking thoughtfully. "At any rate, a man could not walk forty-three miles and back without food and water to keep him. If that inscription is correct, then I am going to head for the boneyard without any further loss of time."

"Do you mean that?" gasped the leader of the outlaw band.

"I do. Do you see that there?" and he pointed to the skeleton.

"Yes, I see it."

"Well, if we stay here we'll be the same as he is, a little later."

"That's right, Ellis," spoke up the little man. "That feller is simply on guard here. We'll start on the forty-three mile journey at once. Whoop her up there!"

Ellis looked at him sharply, and made up his mind that he was becoming unbalanced.

But he said nothing just then.

With a resolute expression on his face he started ahead, the others following with great alacrity.

Ellis was right, as far as his idea about the water was concerned, for they had not traversed more than a quarter of a mile before a trickling sound came to their ears.

Ellis had found a thick, dry tree branch and lit it. Then he held the torch high above his head and pushed forward on the run.

Ten seconds later they came in sight of the running stream.

Eagerly they dropped to the ground and placed their lips to the cooling water.

Long and deep they drank, and when they finally sat up and looked at each other there was a unanimous expression of thankfulness in their faces.

"Thet's ther best drink I've had in my life!" exclaimed Griff Barton.

"You bet it was!" chimed in the little man. "I wonder why it was that ther feller we found back there didn't die right here drinkin' this water."

"You had better let the fellow we found back there rest," spoke up Ellis. "We've enough to think of besides him."

"I know we have, but I'll never fergit that skellikun—not as long as I live! Why, ther poor fellow looked comical sittin' there, and with that sign over his head, 'Forty-three miles to the boneyard—hurry up!' I'd like to know how I could ever fergit it."

He broke into a laugh that sounded strange and unnatural in that rocky passage, and then announced his willingness to follow Ellis to the ends of the earth.

"Well," said Ellis, "we can't tell how soon we'll strike water again, so I guess we had better take all we can with us."

He began to fill a flask as he spoke.

The little vigilant happened to have one with him, and he followed his example.

Griff Barton had nothing to put any water in, as his belongings had been taken from him when he was captured.

"You can drink an extra quantity," said the little man, with a grin. "You won't need as much as we, anyhow, for when we git hungry we're going to kill and eat yer! Think of ther grinnin' feller we left back there! Forty-three miles to ther boneyard! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Stop that!" cried Ellis. "It has been decided that I

am boss of this crowd, and I am going to have no more such talk as that."

"All right," was the rejoinder. "I won't say another word, then. But didn't that feller do some tall grinnin', though! Why, he had three of his front teeth knocked out, and I'll bet——"

"Stop!" cried Ellis, who was now certain that the man was going crazy. "Think of something else, won't you? Do you remember your mother? How good and kind she was to you? You ought to——"

"I remember her," was the reply, in a choking voice. "She's been dead a long while, I kin tell yer! But I remember it as though it was yesterdays."

There were tears in his eyes now, and Ellis felt that he had succeeded in restoring him to his normal state.

"Let's all take another drink," he said, "and then we will push on and get out of here."

Neither of his companions made a reply, but dropped to the ground at the side of the stream and drank deep draughts of the pure water.

Then they got upon their feet, and with Ellis in the lead, set out through the passage.

Undoubtedly Ellis had the best head of the three, but he had not looked far enough ahead when he had figured on walking the forty-three miles through the passage.

That would take them days, instead of hours, and how were they to see their way?

The torch was fast being reduced to ashes now, and in half an hour more it would be gone.

But Ellis led the way at a sharp walk.

He was going as far as he could, anyhow.

On plodded the three in silence through the irregular passage, which was quite big enough to permit a load of hay to pass through it.

To Ellis it seemed as though it had been the bed of a river once, and that in some strange way it had been covered by rocks and earth without filling in.

As the torch burned lower and lower, the bold leader of the trio did all he could to make it last.

He was now beginning to realize that darkness would soon be their lot.

They had covered about six miles when finally the last spark died out.

"There!" exclaimed Ellis; "now we can feel our way for awhile, for there is no use in burning up any more of our clothing just yet."

"I guess I'll lay right down here an' sleep until daylight," said the little man. "I ain't goin' any further tonight."

"Daylight, eh?" remarked Griff Barton, half to himself. "I reckon when you see daylight ag'in it won't be in this country."

The little man seemed to be very sleepy, for he began to snore almost the minute he stretched himself on the ground.

In vain did Ellis try to arouse him.

"I reckon we may as well sleep, too," said Barton, who was just the least bit averse to following the passage.

Ellis saw that there was two against him, so he concluded to let them have their way.

A good sleep might do them good, he thought.

Griff Barton dropped off into a slumber very quickly, but it was a long time before Ellis closed his eyes.

The hope he had of getting out kept him awake.

But when he did finally fall asleep he remained in that state a long time.

When he awoke the first thing he did was to strike a match.

There lay his companions still sound asleep.

Then Ellis pulled out his watch and found that it was nine o'clock.

He knew the night had passed, and though he had slept late himself, he could not understand why it was that the little man and Barton had.

They went to sleep at least three hours before he did.

Ellis sat down and thought over the situation for a few minutes and then, resolved to have a consultation with his companions before he went any further, he aroused them.

"Is breakfast ready?" asked the little vigilant, as he popped up like a Jack-in-the-box.

"Can't you be a little serious?" said Ellis, with just a shade of anger in his voice. "Have a little sense, won't you?"

"All right," was the reply, in an easy tone. "I thought perhaps you'd struck something good to eat. I ain't hungry, though. No—not a bit!"

"I'm goin' back to where that water is, an' fill up on that," remarked Griff Barton, in a dogged tone. "You fellers kin do what you like."

"Here!" called Ellis, as the villain turned to follow the back track. "Come here! We may as well settle on what is to be done."

He struck a match as he spoke and beckoned for the man to come back.

Barton did so rather surly.

"I ain't goin' ter try to walk no forty miles," he said. "You kin do as you like."

"I guess I won't, either," spoke up the little man. "I want to git back there an' have a look at the skellikun."

"All right," exclaimed Ellis, resignedly. "Back we go, then! It is two to one, and I suppose the majority ought to rule. We will go back there and try and dig our way out. We will be able to keep alive on water for a day or two, I guess."

"If it comes to ther worst, outlaw meat won't go bad," observed the vigilant, with a grin.

Griff Barton shrugged his shoulders uneasily.

He was learning to fear the little man more every hour.

"We will go back in the dark," said Ellis, not noticing the remark.

They footed it along in silence for nearly an hour.

Then Ellis struck a match.

The water was not at hand yet, and he started ahead again.

After awhile they heard the trickling of the underground stream.

It made sweet music to their ears, and they hastened forward eagerly.

The next moment they were treated to a surprise that brought cries of joy from their lips.

In the distance they beheld a glimmering light approaching, while the unmistakable sounds of voices came to their ears.

Ellis sprang forward with the speed of a deer.

"Hello! Hello!" he cried.

"Hello!" came the reply.

"It is me—Ellis!"

"All right, then. Take it easy! You are all right."

The man recognized the voice as belonging to Young Wild West.

Two seconds later he was right in the midst of our friends.

Wild, Jim and Oll Gilpin had been reinforced by Charlie and the rest of the men, and they had started to explore the passage for a distance.

They had found the skeleton and read the inscription on the rocky wall above it.

After a short conversation over the matter they had started along to follow the trail that had been made by the bits of charred cloth that had fallen from the first improvised torch of Ellis'.

Just as they heard the sound of running water they had been startled by the voice of Ellis, and now he was with them.

Young Wild West, though much puzzled at finding the man there, was not at all disturbed.

"Are you all alone in this place?" he asked.

"Alone? No! Why, where are the other two?" and Ellis looked around him in amazement. "Griff Barton, the outlaw captain, and the little man belonging to the vigilants was with me. Why didn't they come on, I wonder?"

"May be that they have stopped to get a drink from the water I hear trickling," suggested our hero.

"That must be it," was the answer. "It is fine water—as cool as ice. Let us go and get some of it."

This was a pleasing suggestion to the men, and they at once pushed forward.

Wild carried the lantern, and when he reached the stream he held it aloft and looked around.

The two men who had been the companions of Ellis were not there.

"I don't know what has become of them," and the surprised Ellis shook his head.

"Well, they are not far away, anyhow," said Wild. "I'll fire a shot, and that will probably fetch them here in a jiff."

He did fire, but there was no response in any shape or form.

CHAPTER X.

GRIFF BARTON IN A GREAT STREAK OF LUCK.

When Ellis started forward on a run to reach our friend both the vigilant and Griff Barton remained still in their tracks for some unexplainable reason.

The little man had been bordering on an attack of insanity ever since he saw the skeleton and read the inscription over it.

Now, when he had seen the light and heard the voices of the men in the passage, instead of regaining his full senses, the nerve that held his brain in an unbalanced state snapped, and he was a raving maniac.

But, in spite of this fact, he did not forget that Griff Barton was the leader of the band of murderers and robbers that had raided the town of Gray Plume.

While sane he had possessed a desire to put an end to the villain.

Now he was imbued with a spirit that made the desire sevenfold.

His breath came in quick gasps, and while the patterning of Ellis' feet could be heard, he leaped forward in the darkness and tried to clutch Barton by the throat.

But the outlaw heard the quick breathing, and instinctively he turned and ran away.

He realized that his life was in danger, as only a man possibly could under the same circumstances.

But, unfortunately for him, he ran the wrong way.

He did not run toward the advancing light, probably because he did not want to give the vigilant a chance to catch even a glimpse of him.

Away he sped through the grave-like darkness, running with one purpose in view, and that to get away from his pursuer.

Barton was long-legged and muscular, and could run with great speed.

But his pursuer, though not near his equal physically, was imbued with a strength that was unnatural, and he managed to keep up with him, though not being able to overtake him.

"I'm goin' ter strangle yer, Griff Barton!" cried the crazed man. "I could shoot yer easy enough, but I won't. I'm goin' ter strangle yer!"

At any other time Barton would have turned and fought it out.

But he realized that it was a crazy man that he had to deal with, and being ignorant and superstitious, he could not force himself to do anything but flee for life.

Barton kept on for perhaps a mile.

Then all of a sudden he collided with an angle of rock and went staggering across the passage.

At the same instant there was a crash, followed by a roar, and daylight flashed upon him.

The rascally outlaw captain sprang to his feet in alarm. At first he thought his crazed pursuer had caused the

crash, but in less than a second he found that he was nowhere to be seen.

The passage was filled with a bed of white sand that was running down like the contents of an hour glass, and directly above him was an opening that admitted the light of day upon him.

It is hard to say whether the villain gave thanks to his Creator for this timely deliverance or not; but, at any rate, he gave a nod of pleasure and promptly began working his way up the slanting pile of moving sand.

At first he made little or no progress, but as the opening became more filled at the bottom he was enabled to get a better foothold, and up he went, the lowering sky looking as bright to him as it ever had before on the brightest of summer days.

Once out upon the sandy desert he dropped down, completely exhausted.

He had been running from the madman at the top of his speed for fully a mile, and this, together with his last effort, had been too much for him.

As strong and powerful as he was, Griff Barton sank into a swoon.

How long he remained thus he hardly knew, but it could not have been more than an hour.

Then he got up and hurried away from the opening in the ground.

A curious sort of dry mist still hung over the desert and, forgetful of the fact that he had become lost, Griff Barton hurried on.

He did not once look behind him, either, but kept on untiringly for an hour.

Then all of a sudden he heard the sound of voices, and the next instant he came in sight of a wagon train that was moving across the desert.

A thrill of joy shot through the man's frame.

He felt that he was saved, after all.

"I mustn't tell 'em what has happened at all," he said to himself. "I'll jest tell 'em that I belonged to a party that got wiped out in ther storm last night, an' I've been walking over ther desert ever since, an' that I throwed my empty flask away two hours ago. I'll make out that I was one of them fellers what owned ther two wagons we took at ther start."

Having decided upon this, he called out as loudly as he could.

Barton was promptly heard.

"Whar do you hail from, stranger?" some one answered, and then a horseman came riding toward him.

"I'm all that's left of six," said the villain. "Ther sand storm cleaned us out last night. Horses an' wagons an' my partners—everything's gone, an' I've been trying to get somewhere ever since. Can't you take a feller in with yer an' give him a drink of water an' something ter eat?"

"Sartin we kin! I reckon our gang wouldn't go back on anybody, white, black or red, in this case. Come right on, you weary pilgrim."

Barton followed the horseman to the wagon train, which had come to a halt.

The man who had answered his call was evidently the guide or leader, for he promptly told the men and women that composed the train what Barton told him.

The result was that the villain was taken to one of the wagons and tumbled inside it by the well wishing men.

Then he was fed and made comfortable.

But when the kindly people of the wagon train, which was pursuing its way across the desert by the aid of a compass, took Griff Barton in they were simply nursing the viper that was bound to sting them.

No sooner had the villain began to recover from the effects of his ordeal and hunger than he began to think up some plan to rob his benefactors.

There was a pretty black-eyed widow in the party who had taken rather kindly to him, no doubt feeling sorry for him after hearing his story of the suffering he had undergone.

It was the first time that a woman had smiled upon him in a long time, and Barton fell in love with her—if such a thing could possibly happen to a man of his stamp.

As the day waned, and the wagon train got closer and closer to the western edge of the alkali desert Griff Barton made up his mind to leave the train as soon as it left the sand and take with him two horses, some supplies, and the pretty widow.

He did not consult the woman at all.

The outlaw was not one of the sort to consult any one when he undertook to do such a thing.

He was now his own self again, and he was as reckless as a man of his caliber could well be.

The guide told him that he expected to reach the good lands by two hours after sunset, and that they did not intend to halt for supper until that time.

One of the men had loaned Barton a horse, and when he learned this news the villain was more than satisfied.

The horse was a pretty good one, and he determined to keep it as his own.

"I reckon I'm the only one left of our crowd," he thought. "Though it may be that Young Wild West has got some of 'em prisoners. Anyhow, I'm goin' ter quit 'em for good. That widder is a nice woman, an' her an' me'll git hooked up as soon as we git where a parson is. I'm of ther opinion that she'd agree to it, but I don't want to ask her jest yet. I better git her first, an' then, when she's well away from the rest to ask her. That will be ther proper caper. I reckon."

Traveling by compass was quite an easy thing to do, especially when one knows the exact course he must take.

The guide in charge of the wagon train had crossed the desert many times, and he had never made a mistake in the time he expected to get across.

By crossing the desert over two hundred miles could be saved on a journey from Prescott to the California line.

It seemed that the black-eyed widow was playing right in Griff Barton's hands.

Presently she mounted one of the horses and rode out beside him.

"How do you feel, Mr. Barton?" she asked, bestowing a smile upon him.

"Better," he answered. "Much better. It wouldn't take a feller long to get back his strength if he had you around to hand him a drink of water an' a smile once in awhile."

"Nonsense!" and she blushed, showing that she liked only too well that sort of talk.

They talked on until Barton was satisfied that the woman really did take considerable stock in him.

He showed her how much money he had, and it was no mean pile, either, since he had a full third of the five thousand that had been stolen from the town of Gray Plume, besides as much more that he had possessed before that time.

This had not been taken from him by his captors.

"I'm goin' to stock up a little sheep ranch when I git into Californy," he told her. "I'm goin' ter settle down and live nice and comfortable, an' try an' 'cumulate a few dollars to have in my old age."

"Won't that be nice?" she cried.

"You ~~let~~ it will," he answered. "But there's only one thing that worries me."

"And what is that?" she asked.

"I've got to live alone on ther sheep ranch, because I don't know where I could find a partner."

"But you don't need a partner," she said, archly. "You have quite enough money to start in on a 'modest scale."

"I don't mean a man partner!" he blurted out. "I mean a gal—a woman!"

They were riding along on the left of the wagon train now, and quite a little distance from it.

There was just enough of haze to prevent them from being seen distinctly by those on the train.

Both looked over that way, and then Griff Barton changed all his plans.

He edged his horse up closer, and placed his arm about the widow's waist.

She attempted to pull away from him, but it was only a make believe attempt.

Then the villain proceeded to woo her in his own rough and ignorant way, and she, poor fool, listened to him.

How such a neat and comely woman as she could take ~~on~~ stock in him was a mystery.

But it has been said that woman is a mystery, anyhow, ~~o~~ that probably accounts for it.

When darkness finally overtook them the couple had it all arranged to take their leave of the wagon train as soon as it reached the good lands.

The woman's brother was there, and she was afraid he might object to her marrying the stranger who had been picked up on the desert.

Griff Barton knew pretty well where to find a minister after they got off the desert.

He had been in that part of the country before, and once he got his bearings after leaving the desert he declared that it would not be many hours before he reached a town.

They decided to keep right on riding when the outfit came to a halt.

"How about taking ther horses?" asked Barton. "Won't they put me down as a horse thief?"

"No," she answered. "I will write a note and place it where my brother will find it and tell him where the horses will be found. The wagon train is heading for Silver Butte, which can't be very far from here, according to what I have heard them say."

"I know where it is," cried the villain. "It ain't far from here. Now I know about where we are going to fetch out. You jest write that note an' tell 'em that they kin git their horses when we git there."

"All right."

"An' git ready to leave, as we will soon be where they'll come to a stop fer ther night."

"I will get ready."

"Git me a revolver an' a huntin' knife, too, if you kin."

"Certainly."

"I lost mine when ther sand storm came up, you know, an' we might need' em, as we won't git to Silver Butte much afore mornin', an' if a bear or anythin' bothers us I'll be able ter drop him."

"Oh, I kin get them quite easy," the woman answered.

She did get them, and when she had written the note and placed it where she was sure her brother would find it, she announced that she was all ready for the elopement.

It was just a few minutes inside the time the guide had allotted them to reach the good lands that they struck a thick growth of cacti.

"A mile more an' we'll be ridin' over grass!" exclaimed the guide, waving his hat in the air.

All hands broke into a cheer, then, Griff Barton and his intended bride joining in.

"I reckon now is ther time fer us to git out," he said to her, when they had succeeded in getting ahead of the rest.

"All right!" she answered, and then she turned and looked at the wagon, as though she was sorry she was leaving it.

But only for a moment.

The love that had sprung up for the big man at her side got the best of it, and she rode along by his side, happy and contented.

She knew her brother would forgive her when he found she was married.

The two were picking their way carefully through the cacti when they suddenly heard a sound behind them.

Both turned, and the woman declared that she had seen a horse and rider disappear to the right of them.

But Griff Barton did not see anything of the kind.

"It was ther wind," he said. "See, there's quite a breeze springin' up."

"That is so," she answered. "Ah! there are the stars coining out, too."

"Ther moon will be up putty soon, too, an' that will show us ther way to Silver Butte, where I can't git too soon."

"Or me, either," she answered.

On rode the two, happy in their own way.

Griff Barton had forgotten all that had passed through that day.

He no longer remembered the madman who had pursued him through the passage until he was cut off by the sudden cave-in.

But could he have known that the crazy vigilant had got out of the passage less than ten minutes after him, and that he had reached the wagon train and smuggled himself into one of the wagons, he would not have felt so easy.

But such, indeed, was the case, and even now the avenging madman was hot upon their trail, for it was he the woman had caught a glimpse of.

It looked as though Griff Barton's honeymoon—if it got as far as that—was going to be interfered with.

CHAPTER XI.

THE TRAIL NEARS THE END.

Young Wild West and his friends were very much puzzled when they heard no answering shot from the men they were looking for.

"It's queer where they've gone," said Jim Dart. "I suppose we will have to go through the passage and hunt them up."

"Yes," nodded our hero. "It won't do to go away without trying to look for the little man. As far as Griff Barton is concerned, if he wants to make this passage his tomb he can do so."

"Who is going to follow and look for them?"

"Charlie and I will go. The rest of you can go back to the camp. We won't be very long. If you would just as leave, you can form a camp right in the opening, and then when we want fresh water we can come down here and git it."

"That's a good idea," answered Dart. "Well, go ahead. I'll take care of things."

Young Wild West and Cheyenne Charlie promptly started off.

The boy carried the lantern, thus leaving the others in darkness.

But away back at the end of the passage they could see a faint light, and for it they headed.

For some reason Bud, the darky, kept hold of Jim's coat.

He was nearly frightened out of his wits by what he had seen in the underground passage.

He looked upon Jim as being the leader now, and he meant to stick close to him.

Dart struck a match when he thought they were about where the skeleton was.

He could not have possibly judged any better, for there was the grawsome object right before them.

The darky uttered a yell of fear and flung his arms about the neck of Jim.

"Sabe me, Marsar!" he cried. "Don' yo' let dat t'ing git me—please don't. Ise a good nigger, I is!"

In stepping back to get out of the way from the darky one of the men accidentally struck the skeleton with his foot.

The result was that it fell with a clatter upon the rocky floor, the fleshless joints parting, and the skull rolling off like a ball.

Then the darky not only yelled, but some of the more superstitious of the men as well.

Jim let the match drop from his hand and carried Bud from the spot.

"Shut up!" he called out, sharply. "What is the matter with you, anyway? A lot of dried bones can't hurt you—you ought to know that."

Both the vigilants and the wagon men started on a run for the end of the passage, and when they reached it they got out upon the sand in short order.

Dart gave the darky a boost, and he went up as though the skeleton was after him.

When they were all out Jim told them to hunt up another lantern and fish out all the pails they could from the wrecked wagons.

"We want lots of water," he said, "and down there in the passage is the place to get it. We have got to fix up some way to carry along a couple of barrels of water with us. I guess we may be able to patch up some of the running gear of the wagons and fasten the barrels on in some fashion."

"We can do that, I am quite certain," replied Ellis. "Just let me get something to eat, and I will see to it that some sort of a wagon is rigged up."

"An' I'll boss ther job o' gittin' ther water," spoke up Oll Gilpin.

"All right. Now, we will locate right here until Wild and Charlie come back."

As they were now sure that they had plenty of water, they gave the horses all they could drink.

While the work Jim Dart had laid out was being carried through our friends happened to look over across the desert.

They saw two men approaching, and they were much surprised.

"Blamed if they ain't Wild and Charlie!" exclaimed Jim, as they came a little nearer. "How do you suppose they got out of the passage?"

"I can't imagine," answered Ellis. "I am certain there was no way to get out when I was in there."

"There must have been a cave-in, the same as there was here, after you came through this way."

"There must have been."

"Well, we'll soon know. How long have Wild and Charlie been gone, anyway?"

"A little more than an hour."

"As long as that?"

"Yes, I looked at my watch just as we came out of the passage, and it's just an hour since that time."

"Time flies, it seems."

"You kin bet it does," spoke up Oll Gilpin.

Wild and Charlie, for it was them, sure enough, now reached the camp.

"Where have you been?" asked Jim, in surprise.

"Following the trail of Griff Barton and the vigilants," was the reply.

"You have found a way out of the passage, then?"

"Yes, there must have been a cave-in. We struck the trail of the two where they left it. We followed the trail for quite a distance, and we finally came upon a wagon trail, and saw that the two men had taken it, or else joined it, so we thought we had better come back. My idea is to get ready as quickly as we can and follow the trail."

"Hooray!" shouted Oll Gilpin, and then all hands joined in.

The fact of there being a train crossing the desert made them all feel good.

They knew that the train would not be there if those in charge of it did not know where they were going.

Ellis had managed to patch up a running gear, and two of the horses were hitched to it.

The barrels had been fastened on, and when they had been filled with water Young Wild West mounted his horse and led the way to the trail.

When they were once more upon it they proceeded untiringly on their way, all being confident that they would reach the end of the sandy waste of alkali before many hours had passed.

It was nearly an hour after noon when they halted for something to eat, and when the horses had been rested they set out again.

"I don't believe the wagons are more than an hour and a half ahead of us," said Wild, as he scrutinized the trail carefully.

"Not a bit more than that," retorted Cheyenne Charlie.

"Well, as we are about in the middle of the desert, according to reckonings, if we keep right on we will arrive on the good lands before midnight."

"That's right."

"We will keep right at it, then."

"The trail appears to be pretty straight," spoke up

Jim Dart, as he turned in the saddle and looked back. "They must be using a compass to travel with, or they could never take such a straight line as that."

"Oh, they certainly have a compass, or else they are greenhorns and don't know what a desert is like."

Our friends kept on until darkness set in, when the haze lifted and the stars began to show.

Some of the men were for halting, but our hero was now confident that they had not much further to go before they would be off the desert.

So they continued on their way, the horses trotting along with bending heads, and the riders weary from the everlasting sand.

Half an hour after the moon came up, and they came upon the growth of cacti that the wagon train ahead of them had struck about an hour before.

As they got among the prickly stuff the horses got more life in them, and the members of the vigilance committee struck up a song.

Bud, the darky, became imbued with new life, too, and he took his banjo out of the bag and began tuning it as he sat in the saddle.

This was just what everybody wanted, it seemed, and for the next ten minutes the banjo sounded, and while the dark twanged away he sang some quaint old Southern melodies and completely won the hearts of the rough men of the border.

The trip through the growth of cacti being made, they came upon a rise of ground, and then grass was struck.

And right ahead of them was a bunch of timber!

"Hooray, pilgrims!" cried Oll Gilpin. "We're off the sand at last!"

A rousing cheer went up, which Wild quieted as soon as possible.

"We want to go a little bit easy," he said. "We don't know what kind of men we are going to meet. Suppose they shouldn't take kindly to us?"

"I guess there ain't no danger of that," retorted the vigilance leader. "If they are so funny as that we will have to learn them how to treat decent people, that's all."

"I reckon you'd better leave it to Wild," spoke up Cheyenne Charlie. "He'll know jest what ter do when we come up with the wagon train."

"Certainly I'm going to leave it to him," was the quick rejoinder. "Hello! There's a light ahead, or I'm a Digger Injun!"

Sure enough, a faint glimmer could be seen in the distance.

"It is a campfire," said our hero. "Now, boys, we will head right for it. If Griff Barton is with the train people he has got to be made a prisoner."

"An' hanged!" added Gilpin, decidedly.

"Of course!" echoed the rest of the vigilants. Wild said nothing.

He knew that the villain was deserving of the fate, and as the others of his gang that had been caught were treated

that way, it was right that Barton should suffer a like fate.

Meanwhile the camp fire began growing brighter.

A little further on a voice from the darkness suddenly called out:

"Halt!"

"We are friends!" answered Young Wild West, as he reined in his steed.

"Who are you?"

"I am Young Wild West."

"Never heard of you. Where are you from?"

"We're from Gray Plume," spoke up Oll Gilpin. "We're lookin' for one of our men and an outlaw which we want to hang."

"Come ahead, then. I guess you are all right."

Wild did not hesitate a second, but pushed his horse forward toward the big campfire that could now be seen plainly.

The rest followed him, and as they came to a halt they were promptly surrounded by a crowd of armed men.

"What sort of a lookin' chap is ther feller that belongs to your gang?" asked the man in charge of the train.

Oll Gilpin promptly gave a description of the little vigilant.

"We ain't seen him, then. No sich feller has been here. But a big fellow with a long mustache an' a bad face on him was here. He skipped out with two of our horses an' one of our wimmen went with him."

"Is that so?" exclaimed Wild. "Well, that fellow is the one we want. He is due to be hanged about five minutes after he is caught, if there is a tree close enough at hand. His name is Griff Barton."

"That's ther name he give us," said the leader of the party. "He told us that he was ther last one left of a party that was hit by ther sand storm last night."

"Well, he is the last of the outlaw band we have been trailing. Now, how about the other man? There was another man with him. I know this, for I followed his footmarks right up to your trail."

"Well, there might have been. But if there was we didn't see him. Griff Barton is ther only one what come to us, an' we took him in as one of us, 'cause we took pity on him."

"That's right," spoke up another man. "The scoundrel got in with a sister of mine, and she was fool enough to elope with him. I just found a note from her statin' that they were bound for Silver Butte, an' that we will find ther horses there. They are going to be married as soon as they can find a parson to do ther job, ther note says."

"Silver Butte, eh?" remarked Young Wild West. "That is where myself and partners started for. We have a little business over there in the way of a silver mine. Well, I guess we had better ride on to Silver Butte, boys, an' soon as we get something to eat. We must try and catch Griff Barton before he marries the woman."

"You can have all you want to eat right here," said

the head of the wagon train. "We've got plenty of grub. Jest git off yer horses an' dive in. Silver Butte ain't more'n fifteen miles from here, an' I reckon we'll go along with yer over there. Ther horses kin stand it, I guess."

"Good!" exclaimed our hero.

There was only one thing that puzzled him now, and that was, what had become of the little vigilant?

Half an hour later the whole outfit was in motion on the way to Silver Butte.

CHAPTER XII.

CONCLUSION.

Griff Barton and the widow rode along at a pretty good pace, and reached the town of Silver Butte in an hour and a half.

We will not dwell on the silly talk they indulged in during the journey, but suffice it to say that the woman was well satisfied that she had found the man who would make her a good husband.

Silver Butte was a goodsized mining town that supported three hotels and several saloons.

It was one of the former that the eloping couple rode up to and dismounted.

Griff Barton had been in the town before, and he was known to the proprietor of this particular hotel.

"Hello, Mack!" he called out, familiarly, as he entered the barroom, leaving his bride-to-be outside in charge of the horses.

"Why, hello!" was the reply, and the man reached over and gave him a hearty shake.

It happened that Barton had the reputation of being an honest man in the town, and that was why he was so willing to go there and get a minister to tie the knot.

"How about a minister--can I git one?" asked Barton.

"A minister! Why, what in thunder do you want of a minister?" was the reply, in a surprised tone of voice.

"I've got my intended outside, an' I want to git hitched as soon as I kin."

"You don't mean it, Griff Barton!"

"Yes, I do, Mack!"

"I didn't think a feller with your age an' sense would bother with a woman."

"Well, when a man meets his fate he's got to give in, you know."

"Well, it jest beats blazes what funny things will happen. Have a drink afore you go any further, won't you?"

"Oh, yes! You kin always count on me to take a drink, so long as I am able to lift a hand."

"That's right. Even if you have been soft enough to fall in love, you've some of your old style about you. Ha, ha, ha!"

Then the two poured out the drinks and clinked the glasses together.

After a little further talk, arrangements were made for Griff Barton to bring his prospective bride to the house, while the landlord despatched a man for the minister to tie the knot.

When Barton went outside, and in his tenderest way took the woman by the arm and led her to the private entrance of the hotel he had no idea that a dust-covered, wild-eyed mortal was crouching near, watching what was going on as a fox watches a goose that has strayed from the flock.

The dust-covered, wild-eyed mortal was no other than the little vigilant, who had followed the big scoundrel since the first moment he had been rendered mad by the exciting events he had passed through.

But in that madness there was a certain degree of cunning, but the little man was simply waiting to be in at the finish and make a grand climax of the thing.

Like a snail, the man laid close to the foundation of the house beneath the window of the room the widow had been taken in.

He seemed to be perfectly aware that she was in there, and that the man he was after was there also, but he did not move an inch.

His eyes burned like living coals in the darkness, but there was a growth of vines that ran up, half concealing the window, and behind this he crouched so he could not be seen.

passed.

had not yet been found.

party of horsemen rode up, he came. messenger conducted the clergyman inside the door and fasten it.

He with the wild eyes slowly arose from his sitting place and sneaked inside.

In his hand he held a gleaming knife.

Inside the room sat four people.

They were the landlord of the hotel and his wife, and Griff Barton and the woman he expected to make his wife.

The clergyman followed the messenger to the door of the room, and then as it was opened, he stepped inside.

The messenger stepped out again and closed the door after him, not noticing the figure that cowered in the dark corner which he almost touched as he passed.

"Dominie, here is a case fer yer," said the landlord, grinning as though the whole thing was a great joke.

"Ah!" said the reverend gentleman, "I am very glad to be of service to you in a case of this kind."

"Ye," spoke up Barton, "I reckon this will pay you better than if it was a feller that was about to pass in his chips. Ha, ha, ha!"

"You wish to be made man and wife, I suppose?" said the clergyman.

"Ye," answered Griff Barton, stepping to the center of the floor and dragging the blushing woman with him.

"Your given name, please."

"My first name is Griffith."

"And mine is Eliza," faltered the widow.

"Well, Griffith, join hands with Eliza."

"There you are, dominie. Now, let her fly!"

"Griffith, do you—"

At this juncture there was a shriek that almost froze the blood in the veins of the outlaw captain.

Then a figure darted forward, and a piece of glittering steel flashed in the lamplight.

"Ha, Griff Barton!" cried the madman, for it was he who had entered at that moment. "Your time has come; you're going to get married all right, but your bride is Death! Take that, you cowardly murderer of women and children!"

There was a thud and then, before any one could lift a hand to stop him, the madman was out of the room.

Griff Barton sank to the floor, the life blood oozing from a wound in his left breast.

The woman who so nearly became his wife sank in a swoon to the floor, while the clergyman recovered himself sufficiently to kneel beside the dying man.

At that instant there came the tramp of many feet, and the door was burst open.

In come the brother of the widow, followed by Young Wild West.

And after them came Cheyenne Charlie, Jim Dart and a whole lot of men from the wagon train.

"Are we in time to stop the marriage?" asked Wild, in a ringing tone.

"Yes," answered the minister. "Death has already done that. The poor man is already breathing his last. The assassin struck him down."

"Ha, ha, ha!" came from the window, in a shrill voice.

Our hero looked and saw the face of the little vigilant.

"I done it!" cried the madman. "I foller'd Griff Barton, an' jest as he thought everything was all right, I finished him. That pays him fer what he done over in Gray Plume. Ha, ha, ha! He thought he could get away from me, didn't he?"

The next instant the face was gone.

And at the same time Griff Barton breathed his last. Young Wild West forced his way outside.

He gave a signal, and his two partners joined him.

"Well," he said, "I guess our crooked trail has come to an end, boys."

"I reckon so," replied the scout, shrugging his shoulders.

"Let us go and put up at the hotel across the street. We can see about things in the morning."

They went over and easily obtained the accommodations they wanted.

The next morning they found the vigilants and the men who had been robbed of their wagons by the outlaws waiting for them to show up.

Old Gilpin and Ellis rushed forward and, catching hold of Wild, lifted him high on their shoulders.

"Boys," said the former, "this is Young Wild West, ther whitest fellow what ever lived. He said he'd help us folle a crooked trail and help bring a lot of murderers to justice, an' he stuck to it until we did. It all lays to him that we won out in ther game. Three cheers for Young Wild West, I say!"

The cheers were given with a will.

Then the brother of the woman who had run away with the outlaw captain stepped over and took our hero by the hand.

"I want to thank you for bringing us here in sich a hurry last night," he said. "It is all over now, for my sister died from the shock soon after you went out of the room last night. The doctor says it was heart disease, and perhaps it was all for the best, as she was never quite balanced in her mind since she lost her husband two years ago. The poor man who went crazy and followed his victim so many miles in order to kill him at the moment when he thought he had triumphed, has died, too. His body was found across the street this morning without a mark on it. Another case of heart disease, so they say."

Just how the little vigilant had managed to follow his victim so far without it being known by the members of the party of the wagon train they did not know.

There is really little more to add to this story.

Suffice it to say that Young Wild West and his partners transacted their business in Silver Butte, and then in due time returned home.

Though the desert they had crossed might have been an attraction for them, they concluded to let it alone.

"The inscription, '43 Miles to the Boneyard. Hurry up!' was undoubtedly made by the poor fellow, whose bones we found beneath it. He did it when he was raving and out of his head, I suppose," said Young Wild West, as they talked about the remarkable experience they had undergone while they were "Lost on the Alkali Desert."

THE END.

Read "YOUNG WILD WEST AND THE BROKEBOWIE; or, THE OUTLAWS OF YELLOW FORK," which will be the next number (56) of "Wild West Weekly."

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